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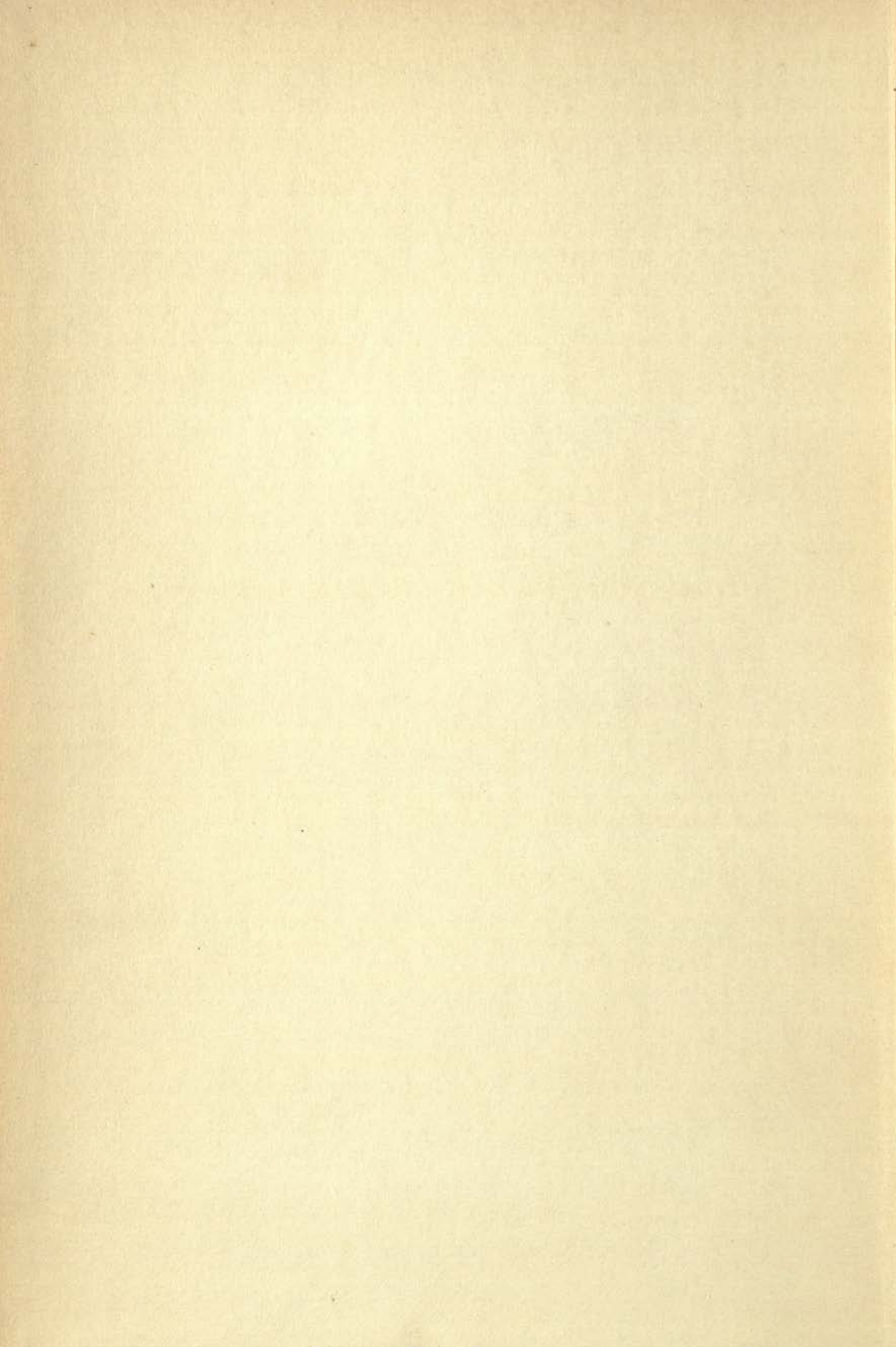
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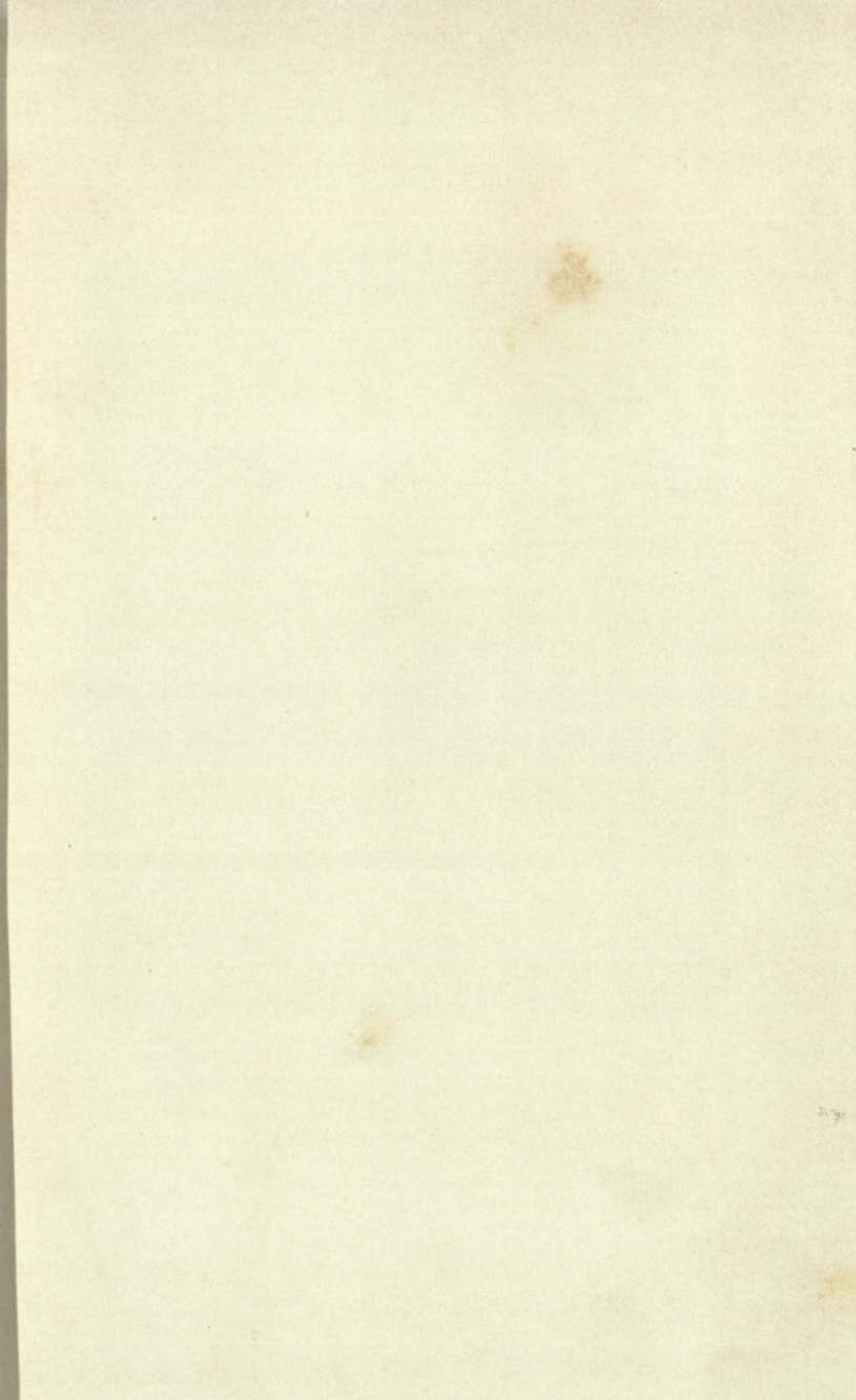
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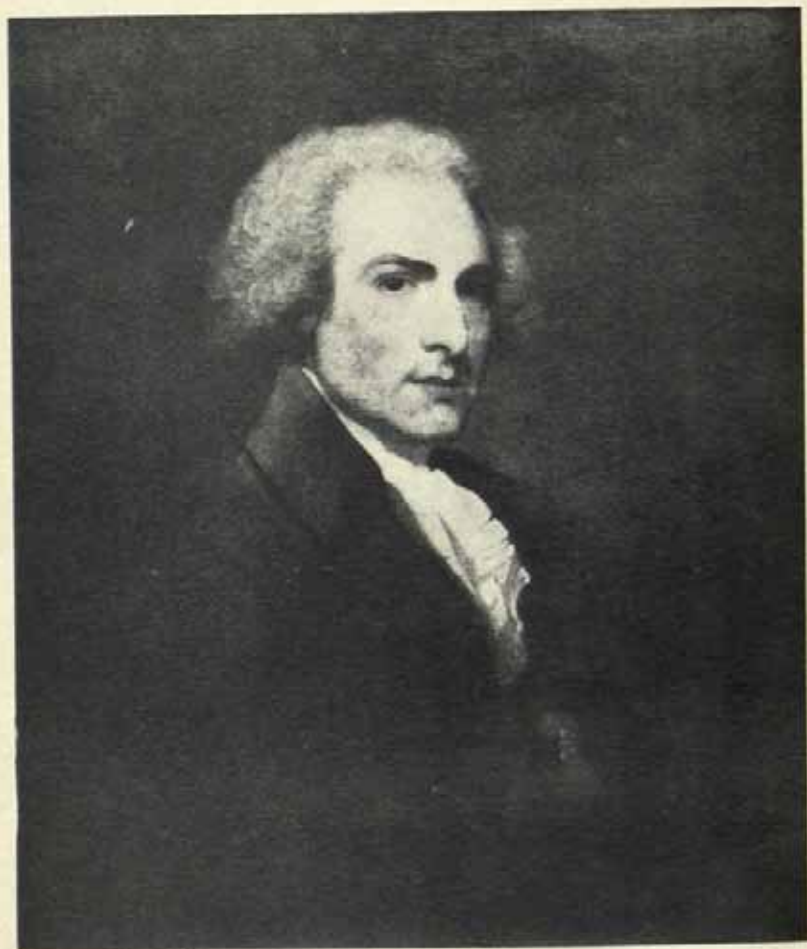




A HISTORY OF THEATRICAL ART







1.—John Philip Kemble.

*Frontispiece*

*From the painting by G. Stuart.*



# A History of Theatrical Art

In Ancient and Modern Times by

Karl Mantzius

Volume VI

Classicism and Romanticism

Authorised Translation by

C. Archer



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## PREFACE

WITH the present Volume—Vol. VI.—I bring my *History of Theatrical Art* to an end. Things have not gone quite so badly with me as with the historian of the Drama, J. L. Klein, whose thirteen mighty volumes come down no farther than to the pre-Shakespearean period. But many may perhaps think that they have gone badly enough. I had planned to write three volumes—the three have grown into six, and, even so, the sixth will appear in three parts—though these are complete and ready for the press, so that no further extension of the work is to be apprehended. But these six volumes have brought me no farther than the Romantic period.

In closing my book at this point, however, I am not merely actuated by the consideration that everything must come to an end. My chief reason is that, if my work has been properly done, these six volumes should serve as a description of the whole foundation on which modern theatrical art is based. Historic completeness has not been attempted in this book; it has not been the author's aim to produce a work of reference in which the names of all actors and of all theatres are to be found. The intention has been to present a picture, mainly from the sociological point of view, of the course of development followed by theatrical art through the ages; and accordingly only such phenomena have been selected for notice as have in a marked degree furthered—or hampered—that development.

This work has occupied me for many—more than twenty—years. I shall doubtless feel a sense of loss, now

that I can no longer, from time to time, put forth a volume on the subject which long familiarity has endeared to me. And, before bidding a final farewell to my task, I cannot refrain from saying a word of thanks to my patient readers, to say nothing of the many friends who, in various ways, have stood by me with help and counsel.

KARL MANTZIUS.



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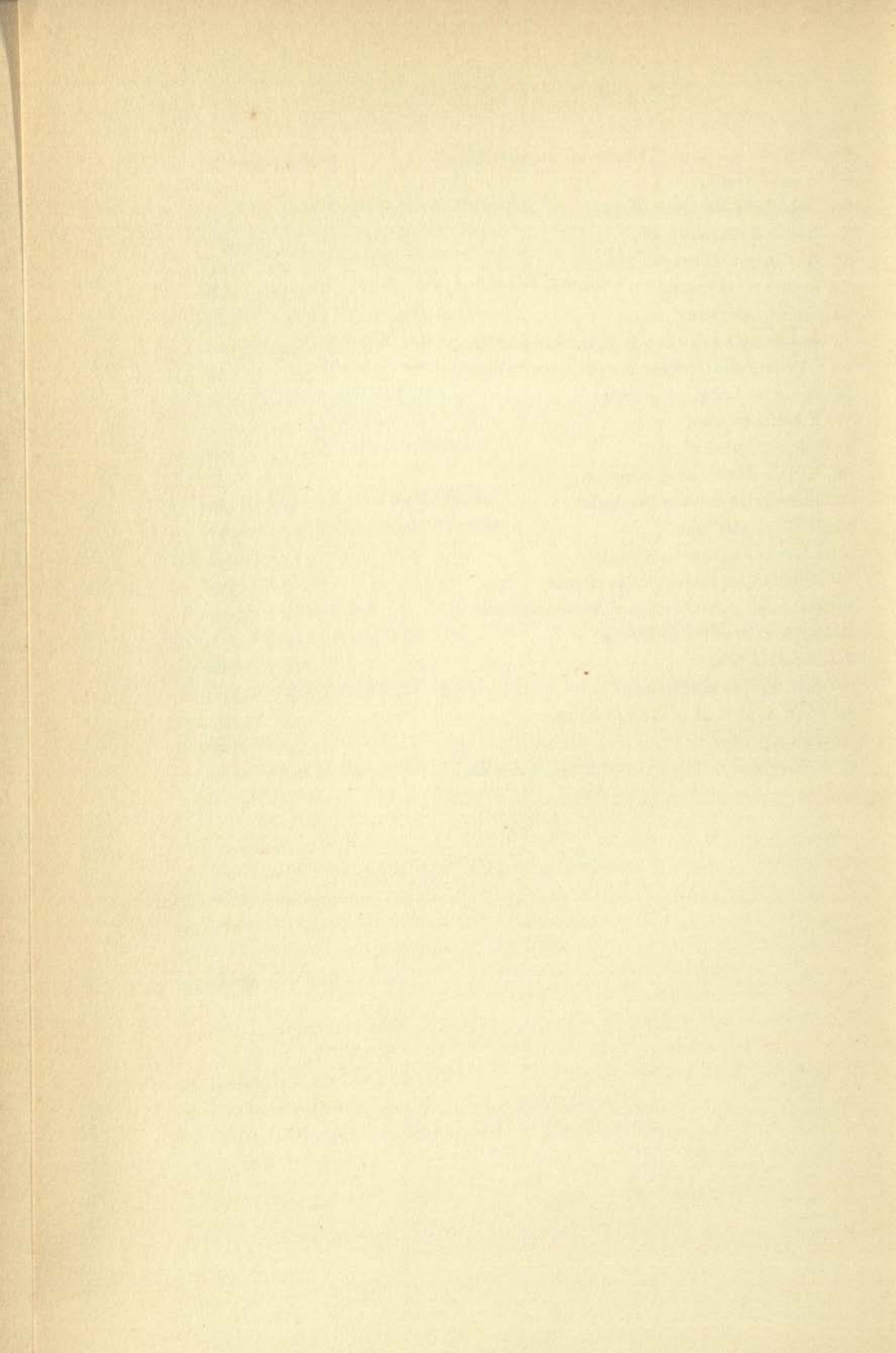
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## PART I

### SHERIDAN, THE KEMBLE, AND KEAN

#### SHERIDAN'S MANAGEMENT

##### I

The English Theatre after Garrick—Drury Lane and Covent Garden—Goldsmith and Sheridan—Sheridan assumes the Management of Drury Lane—The Dramatic Authors of the Time.

WITH Garrick's retirement from management and the stage, the world of English theatrical art lost, as it were, its fixed centre. Not only had his temperament, with its fortunate blend of Gallic fire and British self-control, made him the most consummate actor of the eighteenth century, but his rare power of organization had enabled him to make of the theatre an institution to be reckoned with in the world of culture, and of the art of stage-presentation a matter of consequence in and for itself, a matter worthy of criticism, analysis and discussion. It is with the Garrick period that theatrical criticism, properly so called, begins: that literary men for the first time find it worth while to interest themselves in theatrical art, as such. Travellers in their letters give full and careful accounts of their visits to the theatre, and describe the acting of the chief performers in minute detail: the most eminent painters and engravers employ all their art in producing characteristic portraits of the leaders of the stage: voluminous biographies and memoirs of and about the members of the theatrical profession find favour with the public—evidence, all this, of a rapidly growing taste and feeling for the drama and the art of stage-presentation. Especially, we must note, for the latter; for the art of acting comes to over-



shadow the art of dramatic poetry. No new dramatists of importance appear on the scene, and critics and the public put up with the most incredible mutilations and distortions of the existing dramatic repertory, even (and not least) in the case of the national hero, Shakespeare, provided only that the characters are represented by accomplished actors.

Of course this taste and feeling for theatrical art, which had sprung up so rapidly, did not vanish at once on Garrick's retirement from the stage. After it, as before, people no doubt frequented the theatre, and at first very likely hardly noticed any difference. Indeed, such systematic and energetic cultivation as the public taste for theatrical art had undergone must necessarily produce far-reaching effects. Still, observers of later generations cannot fail to see the period that followed as one of rapid decline, from a high level of clearness, order and settled purpose, towards a chaos of indifference, uncertainty, and confusion of ideas.

This decline affected theatrical life in general, but was in the nature of things especially marked in the case of Garrick's own theatre, Drury Lane, which, on his retirement in 1776, he had managed for some thirty years.

The only theatre in London, or indeed in Great Britain, which was in a position really to compete with Drury Lane, was Covent Garden.<sup>1</sup>

This theatre, built in 1732 by John Rich, who was originally a Harlequin, but was also a capable man of the theatre, had based its repertory, during his management, mainly on spectacular pantomime.<sup>2</sup> But after his death (1761), and particularly when the direction of affairs came into the hands of the dramatic author George Colman (the elder), there was a change of policy. In the year 1767, when Colman, with three other partners, took over the management, he was a man of thirty-five years of age, in a good economic position, and with a creditable record

<sup>1</sup> Both theatres have several times been burnt down and rebuilt. At present Covent Garden is devoted almost exclusively to Opera, while Drury Lane is used mainly for large-scale melodrama and Christmas pantomime.

<sup>2</sup> For the conditions at Covent Garden in this period, see *The Cibber Period* in vol. v. of this work.

as dramatic author. He had worked for and with Garrick, and his two best-known comedies, *The Jealous Wife* and *The Clandestine Marriage*,<sup>1</sup> had been produced at Drury Lane. He was not only a prolific and adroit playwright, but possessed also real ability as a theatrical director. He managed to attract and keep together a company of good actors, but it was especially by his choice of repertory that he succeeded in raising the status of the old Pantomime-theatre. To him fell the honour of introducing to the stage the two most distinguished comedy-writers of the time, Goldsmith and Sheridan; and though, in the case of the first-named, the honour could not rightly be ascribed to Colman, since it was with the extremest reluctance that he accepted and produced *The Good-Natured Man* and *She Stoops to Conquer*, yet these productions shed a lustre on his theatre, and raised it almost to an equality with Garrick's own.

To us, at this day, it appears strange that Oliver Goldsmith's dramatic work, which, with its fresh, spontaneous and truly national humour, seems so obviously made to go straight to the heart of the English public, should have met with so much opposition and found so little understanding and appreciation among the contemporary managers and actors. But freshness and nature in comedy were not at the moment in fashion: it was thus by something like a surprise attack that Goldsmith's comedies, particularly *She Stoops to Conquer*,<sup>2</sup> won such a brilliant victory, giving the lie to the prophecies of all the wisest theatrical strategists. Almost the only champion of this now classical comedy was Goldsmith's friend, the formidable Dr Samuel Johnson, whose heavy artillery almost forced the production of the play on the reluctant Colman, in the face of protests continued literally till the curtain had fallen on the last Act and the great success of the

<sup>1</sup> Both in the repertory of the Danish Royal Theatre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

<sup>2</sup> *She Stoops to Conquer, or The Mistakes of a Night*, was produced for the first time at Covent Garden, 15th March 1773, was played throughout that season, and immediately put on again at the opening of the next season. It was produced at the Danish Royal Theatre in 1785, and kept its place in the repertory till 1875.



piece was established. Several of the principal actors threw up their parts before the rehearsals began, and the cast, with one exception,<sup>1</sup> consisted either of young and untried, or of obscure, players. Several of these made their name in this production, particularly a young actor named Quick, who made a great success as Tony Lumpkin, the mischievous ne'er-do-well bumpkin-squire, an excellent character, which, strangely enough, had been refused by Henry Woodward,<sup>2</sup> an actor who had obtained great popularity in just this line of parts.

It was fated that Oliver Goldsmith should not follow up his victory in drama. He died only the year after, without writing anything else for the theatre, except a little farce thrown together for Quick's benefit in gratitude for his impersonation of Tony Lumpkin.

The young Sheridan found much less difficulty in gaining a foothold on the stage. On both sides, through his father, the well-known provincial manager and actor, Thomas Sheridan, and his mother, the authoress, Frances Sheridan,<sup>3</sup> née Chamberlain, he was intimately connected with the world of the theatre. Richard Brinsley Sheridan himself, when he made his first public appearance as dramatic author, was a handsome young man of twenty-four, well known for his romantic love-affair with the charming young oratorio-singer, Elizabeth Linley, whom he had carried off from her home at Bath to free her from the pursuit of an importunate admirer, and had married secretly in France,

<sup>1</sup> The exception was Edward Shuter (born about 1728—died 1776), who played Hardcastle, the old country-gentleman who is mistaken for an inn-keeper. Shuter was a first-rate comedian, to whom Goldsmith was very grateful—he played Croaker in *The Good-Natured Man* to the author's entire satisfaction. He was withal an extraordinary being; exceedingly religious, a great drinker, and of a bottomless ignorance—he was barely able to read his parts, and could not write at all; on the stage he had, when sober, a natural wit and a certainty of touch in comedy, which elicited the highest admiration from the best judges of the period, Garrick for instance.

<sup>2</sup> It is true that Woodward (1714-1777) was at this time nearly sixty; but this free-living, dashing actor was not usually deterred by his age from taking youthful parts.

<sup>3</sup> As to the father, see vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), p. 391. Frances Sheridan was a lady of talent and culture, who made a great success with her novel, *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), and her comedy, *The Discovery*, which Garrick produced in 1763. She died while Richard Brinsley Sheridan was still a boy.



2.—Quick as Tony Lumpkin.





afterwards returning to England to chastise his ruffianly rival.

This first great adventure of his life furnished Sheridan with some of the motives and incidents of his first comedy, *The Rivals*, but he exercised extreme discretion in disguising the incidents used, and it cannot be denied that the young author's presentment of the theme falls considerably short of the real-life story in interest and dramatic movement.

*The Rivals*, now a classic of the English theatrical repertory, is a gay comedy, written in an amiably youthful and flippant yet polished style, and exhibiting a gallery of characters, which, though greatly exaggerated, yet proved capable in good hands of appearing natural and human on the stage, because, like Goldsmith's, they were permeated by an easy flow of humour, and still more because the straightforward, unaffected style gave them an air of reality, which did not intrinsically belong to them, but which stood out in contrast with the artificial delicacy and affected sentiment of the work of most contemporary dramatists.

Sheridan submitted this, his first, play to Covent Garden, where his young wife had appeared before her marriage in *Oratorio*.<sup>1</sup> It was at once accepted, and produced without delay (17th January 1775). At the first performance the piece fell short of the success Sheridan had expected, and he at once withdrew and rewrote it, and had the parts to some extent recast, with the result that *The Rivals* in its revised form attained a great and genuine success. Sir Anthony Absolute, the blustering old father Mrs Malaprop, with her many mangled polysyllables; the Irish baronet, Sir Lucius O'Trigger, and the exquisitely sentimental Miss Lydia Languish, took their place from that time among the permanent figures of the English stage.<sup>2</sup>

Sheridan further confirmed his quick-won fame—apart from the little farce *St Patrick's Day*—by the production of a musical play, *The Duenna*, for which his father-in-law,

<sup>1</sup> After her marriage to Sheridan she never appeared again in public, though she had a splendid voice, which she used with great expression and feeling.

<sup>2</sup> The piece became famous abroad as well as in England. It was in the repertory of the Danish Royal Theatre from 1799 till past the middle of the nineteenth century.



Linley,<sup>1</sup> wrote the music. It was produced the next year (1776), also at Covent Garden, and was an enormous success. It was performed seventy-five times in succession—in those days a quite unusual ‘run’—and Sheridan became a celebrity in the world of the theatre. Great things were expected of the charming, highly-gifted young man, and it surprised no one that he should aim at nothing less than to be Garrick’s successor in the direction of the first theatre in London, the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. What was more surprising was that he should attain his ambitious aim so quickly and at such an early age, especially as he possessed no capital and the theatre was a very expensive property to acquire. It was valued at £70,000, of which Garrick owned one-half, and his business partner, one Lacy, the other half. It was arranged that Lacy should retain his share for the time, and that Garrick should be bought out by a payment of £35,000. Of this sum Sheridan engaged for two-sevenths, his father-in-law, Linley, for another two-sevenths, and a friend, Dr Ford, for the remaining three-sevenths.

It has puzzled many historians of the theatre and of literature how a penniless young man like Sheridan can have suddenly attained a financial position which enabled him to pay up so considerable a sum as £10,000; and malicious persons have not failed to suggest that he settled this item of debt on the principle on which he dealt with so many others later: by simply not paying it. It must not be forgotten, however, that the theatrical business in England was at that time monopolized by the patent theatres, and that the possession of a monopoly such as that of Drury Lane Theatre, which had brought Garrick an enormous fortune, constituted such excellent security that few would hesitate to advance even large sums on the strength of it. Garrick evidently had confidence in the capable young dramatist, and it is nowhere stated that his money was not forthcoming in due course.

At first, indeed, all went well. Sheridan set his whole

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Linley was a musician and composer of ability, residing in Bath—the most fashionable watering-place of the period—where Sheridan became acquainted with him and his family. The elder Sheridan at this time also lived at Bath, where he taught rhetoric and elocution.



family to work in the theatre. He himself attended to the general management and choice of repertory, but, as he was hopelessly unbusiness-like and ignorant in money matters, his wife, Elizabeth Linley, the lovely young girl of eighteen, took over charge of the accounts. His father, the stubborn and pedantic old Thomas Sheridan, he appointed stage-manager; his father-in-law, Thomas Linley, musical composer to the theatre and director of Oratorio;<sup>1</sup> his mother-in-law, Mrs Linley, became wardrobe-keeper; and his brother-in-law, Richard Tickell—married to Mary Linley, a singer like her sister—was a sort of secretary, who among other duties saw to the advertising.<sup>2</sup>

Under these apparently favourable auspices Richard Brinsley Sheridan was able to open the new era in the history of Drury Lane Theatre, on the 21st September 1776, with a production of *The Rivals*, the piece which had made him famous.

It was as a dramatist that he had made his name, and in the beginning he seems to have understood that he must rely for success as manager chiefly on his talent as a dramatic author. It must have been clear to him that this was the only respect in which, from the point of view of theatrical management, he had the advantage of his predecessor. Whereas Garrick had been but a mediocre playwright, Sheridan possessed an innate, natural faculty for comedy-writing, comparable to Garrick's own genius for acting, and, but that he tired so early in its exercise, might undoubtedly have developed it into a mastery as consummate as that attained by Garrick in his art.

<sup>1</sup> It was customary at this period to include Oratorio along with the regular drama in the repertories of the great theatres. Thus Handel was for many years—up to the time of his death—director of Oratorio at Covent Garden.

<sup>2</sup> The art of advertisement—"the puffing," as it was called—had in recent years, particularly in England, been carried to a height previously unknown. One of Sheridan's biographers found among his posthumous papers a small manuscript, which shows that theatrical managers, even at that early date, were not unacquainted with the very practical plan of themselves supplying the newspapers with criticisms of their productions. The curious little document runs thus: "The Manager has got it up in his usual style of liberality; the performers highly merit the thanks of the author, the manager and the public. The performers were all at home in their respective parts. Mr Henderson was great beyond description, and if possible excelled his usual excellence. Miss Young and Charles Lewis shone with incomparable lustre, and received, from a most crowded and brilliant audience, repeated bursts of applause."



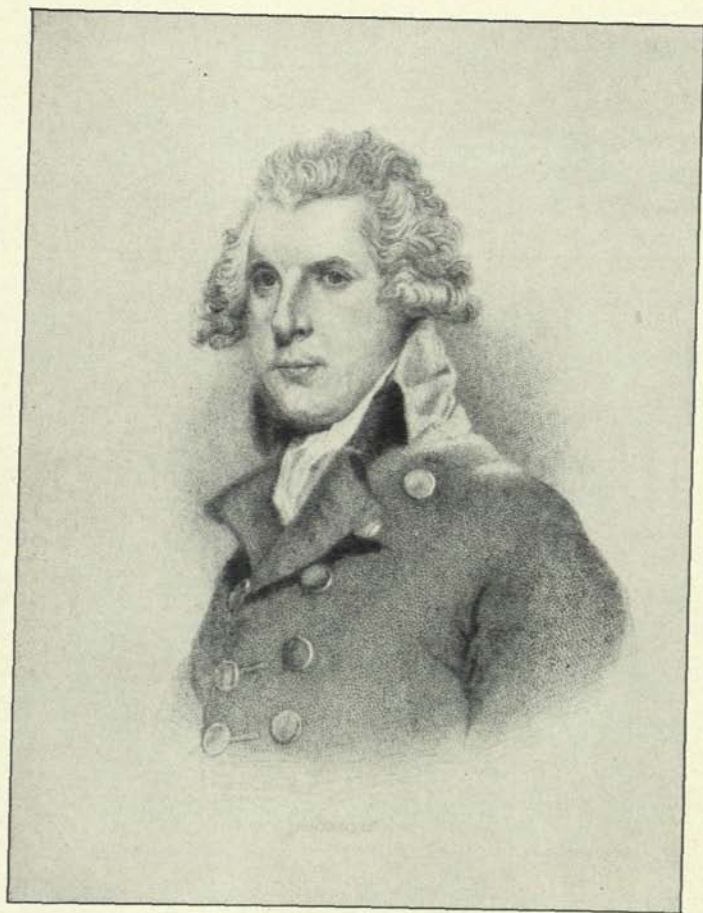
Meanwhile, however, he set to work with energy, producing, as the novelty of his first season, the *School for Scandal*, the play which made him world-famous, and which stands out as the culminating point of the comedy of this period, and is, indeed, perhaps the only product of the eighteenth century English drama which still possesses real vitality.

Sheridan was no originator. On the contrary, even this his best comedy is in essentials an outgrowth or culmination of the movement which, having its original source in France, had flourished during the Restoration period.<sup>1</sup>

Time had worn away the sharp, the too sharp, edges of that gay and far from prudish period. People were now, if not much more moral, at least much more delicate in their methods of expression. True, the works of Wycherley, Vanbrugh, and Congreve, the witty amateurs of the Restoration theatre, were still popular on the stage, but only in revised and expurgated versions. These frivolous 'gentlemen writers' had in their day written for their own pleasure and as it pleased themselves: in the new age a band of professional dramatists had arisen, who for the most part wrote to earn their bread and to please the public. The themes and characters of the drama were not so very different from those of the Restoration period: but they were served up sweetened with a sugar of sentiment, mingled with a good deal of dilute enthusiasm *à la* Rousseau for the innocence of the country in contrast with the corrupt civilization of cities, and rendered very much more acceptable to the taste by the more delicate handling of the love interest.

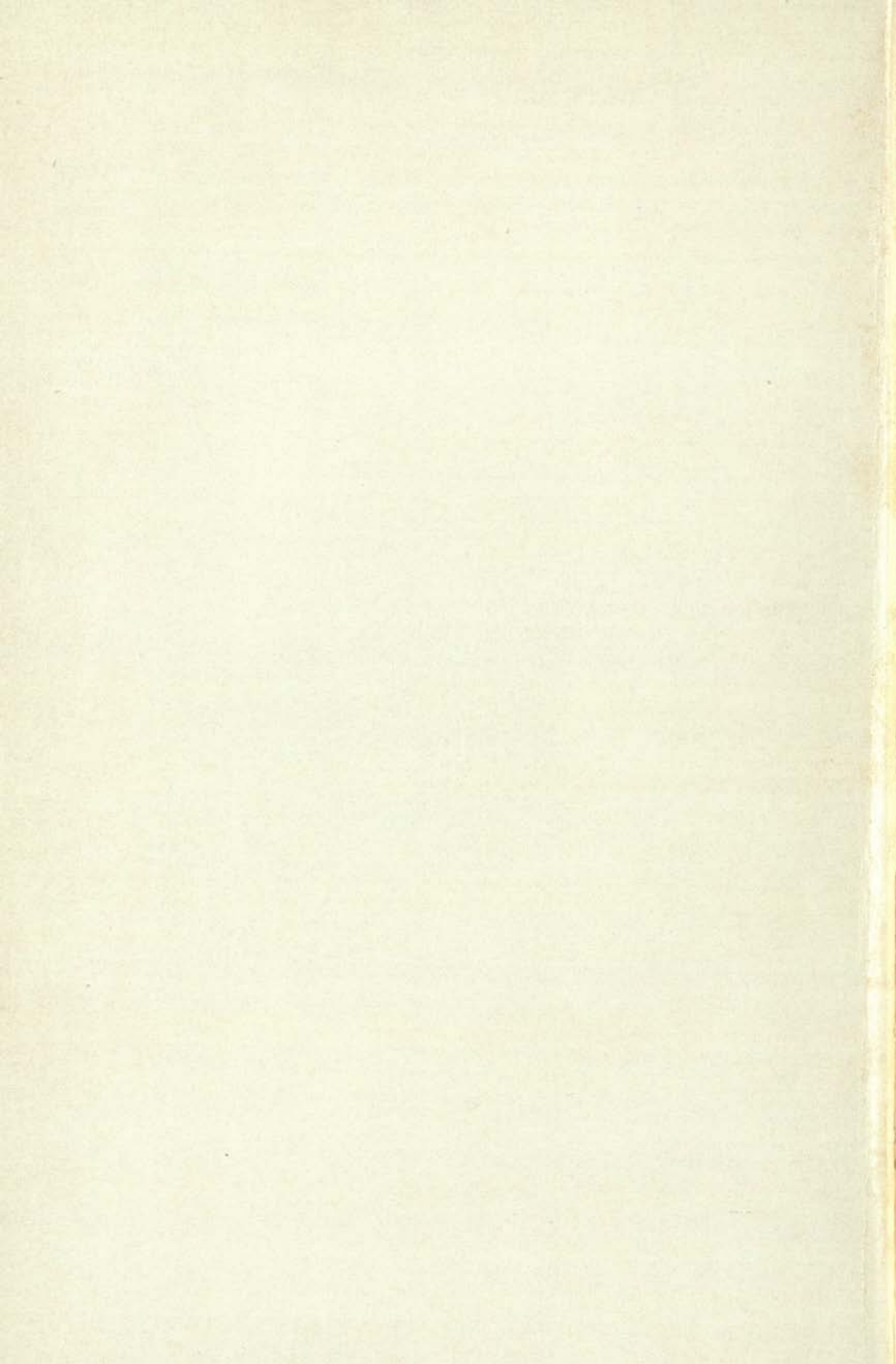
The same boisterous, blustering old country-gentleman was still constantly seen on the stage; only now he hid under his crusty exterior an astonishingly tender heart, which obliged him, every time he had treated his servant to a volley of the fantastic terms of abuse in which the English tongue is so rich, suddenly and without visible reason to wring the same servant by the hand and burst out: "Faithful old friend"; and to brush away a tear at least once in every Act at some proof of nobility of soul in

<sup>1</sup> See vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*) pp. 306-314.



3.—Richard Brinsley Sheridan.





himself or others. The sons of these old gentlemen were still the same sadly frivolous and impertinent sparks, engaged in ruining themselves and all connected with them by play and riotous living: but now they invariably reformed at the right moment, and were usually lucky enough to inherit considerable fortunes in the last Act, from distant relatives who did not otherwise appear in the piece, and whom the author could thus slaughter in cold blood without interfering with the joy either of the heirs or the spectators. There were the same comic Irish majors, the same, but now developing a hitherto unexampled moderation and contempt for worldly goods; the same old maids or widows, eager for husbands or finery; the same booby sportsmen talking nothing but horses and bets; the same drunken gardeners and jovial countrymen. The only new addition, one may say, to this gallery of stock theatrical types was the naïve young girl, the ingénue, who for more than a hundred years has devastated the stage, and who then, as now, made her entrance skipping and clapping her hands, touching all right-feeling hearts and putting all evil designs to shame by her complete and utter ignorance of all things between earth and heaven.<sup>1</sup>

These were the puppets that formed the stock-in-trade of the ordinary playwrights of the day: such as the very prolific Richard Cumberland, several of whose pieces, for example *The West Indian*, *The Cholerick Man*, *The Natural Son*, *The Jew*, etc., had great success both in England and abroad;<sup>2</sup> the two George Colmans, father and son, who both attained a certain prominence, the first with his *Jealous Wife*, and *Clandestine Marriage*, the second with *Ways and Means*,<sup>3</sup> *John Bull*, and *Bluebeard*;

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Holcroft's *Road to Ruin*, where an early type of this theatrical figure, so popular even down to Pailleron's day, is to be found in Sophia Warren.

<sup>2</sup> The Danish Royal Theatre, which at this period went to England for much of its repertory, played four of Cumberland's pieces. Of these *The Natural Son* in particular (performed fifty-nine times between 1791-1795) had remarkable success. *The Jew* held the stage until well on in the nineteenth century, when it was played by Dr Ryge and C. Winslöv.

<sup>3</sup> *Ways and Means*, or *A Trip to Dover*, performed at the Danish Royal Theatre under the name of *Imprudent Hospitality*. The other Colman plays named above were also performed in Denmark, all but *Bluebeard*, which was a musical entertainment.



Thomas Holcroft and Frederick Reynolds, both capable and popular playwrights, whose many productions—Reynolds alone wrote about a hundred—flooded the stages of Europe;<sup>1</sup> the actress Mrs Inchbald (née Simpson), John Kemble's friend, who wrote nearly a score of plays, some of which were very popular, if not otherwise of much note; the witty and refined Mrs Cowley, who rarely set foot inside a theatre, but who produced one of the greatest successes of the period in *The Belle's Stratagem*, which was played within our own times by Henry Irving and Ellen Terry; lastly, the unfortunate Isaac Bickerstaffe—the ex-officer of marines whose fate resembled that of Oscar Wilde, and whose specialty was the musical idyll depicting rustic innocence (*Love in a Village*, *The Maid of the Mill*).

It cannot be said that it was because Sheridan's character-drawing went much deeper than that of these very superficial playwrights, or because he had anything of great importance to say, that his plays, and especially *The School for Scandal*, had such a powerful effect upon the public, and have retained their effectiveness in such a surprising degree. It is possible that, in the case of *The School for Scandal*, his original conception was serious; that he had the idea of writing a satire which should strike scandal-mongering a real, crushing blow—he had already had personal experience of the cunning and treacherous attacks of slanderous tongues, and there is something in the scheme of the play which seems to hint that he had a serious intention of the kind—but the light and easy taste of the time and his own light and easy temperament carried him away, and *The School for Scandal* became a society-comedy like so many others, with the single difference that its natural, unsentimental humour, its ready and brilliant wit, and above all, its intuitive dramatic power,<sup>2</sup> make it appear on the stage, what in reality it is not, a strikingly true picture of the men, the minds and manners of the times.

<sup>1</sup> Reynolds was beforehand with J. L. Hejberg in writing a vaudeville named *No*, which, however, has nothing in common with the Danish piece except the "No" motive. See K. Mantzius: *The "No" Motive in English*—Dania, vol. v.

<sup>2</sup> The fourth Act, containing the celebrated Screen-scene, is rightly regarded as a masterpiece of naturally-managed dramatic construction.



4.—Mrs Fanny Abington (p. 12)



5.—Elizabeth Farren (p. 17).





It is clear that such was its effect upon the public at its original production—on the 8th May 1777. It was a triumph the like of which had not been seen for very many years. The public thronged the theatre whenever *The School for Scandal* was announced, the first twelve performances brought in some £3300, at that time a colossal figure, and two years later the treasurer of the theatre could still write in his diary that *The School for Scandal* diminished the interest taken in new pieces.

## II

Sheridan's Management—Thomas King, Mrs Abington—John Henderson, Miss Farren—the Sheridans, father and son.

HORACE WALPOLE, whose celebrated *Letters* contain much sharp but at the same time penetrating and well-informed criticism of plays and acting, writes<sup>1</sup> of the performance of *The School for Scandal*:

"To my great astonishment there were more parts performed admirably in *The School for Scandal* than I almost ever saw in any play. Mrs Abington was equal to the first of her profession; Yates (the husband),<sup>2</sup> Parsons, Miss Pope, and Palmer, all shone. It seemed a marvellous resurrection of the stage. Indeed, the play had as much merit as the actors. I have seen no comedy that comes near it since *The Provoked Husband*."<sup>3</sup>

The company which Sheridan had inherited from Garrick was in fact specially trained for and excellently suited to comedy of this kind. And Sheridan the elder, who staged the piece, evidently did not succeed in destroying the excellent ensemble that was a legacy from Garrick's time, though he was so incredibly foolish as to reject the friendly advice offered by that accomplished pastmaster of the stage, and though, no doubt by reason of his morbid jealousy of his more brilliant son, he himself could see no merit in the play.

<sup>1</sup> In a letter to R. Jephson, Esq., July, 1777.

<sup>2</sup> Walpole is wrong here. Yates played Sir Oliver Surface, not the husband (Sir Peter Teazle).

<sup>3</sup> *The Provoked Husband, or A Journey to London*, by Vanbrugh and C. Cibber.



The company included Thomas King, a steadfast pillar of Drury Lane during many years; a tall thin man of distinguished appearance; one of those valuable actors who, without possessing genius, by dint of taste and industry work themselves up to a high rank in the favour of their managers and the public. He played Sir Peter Teazle, and the part became his very best character. It was in it that he bade farewell to the stage many years later, at the ripe age of seventy-two.<sup>1</sup>

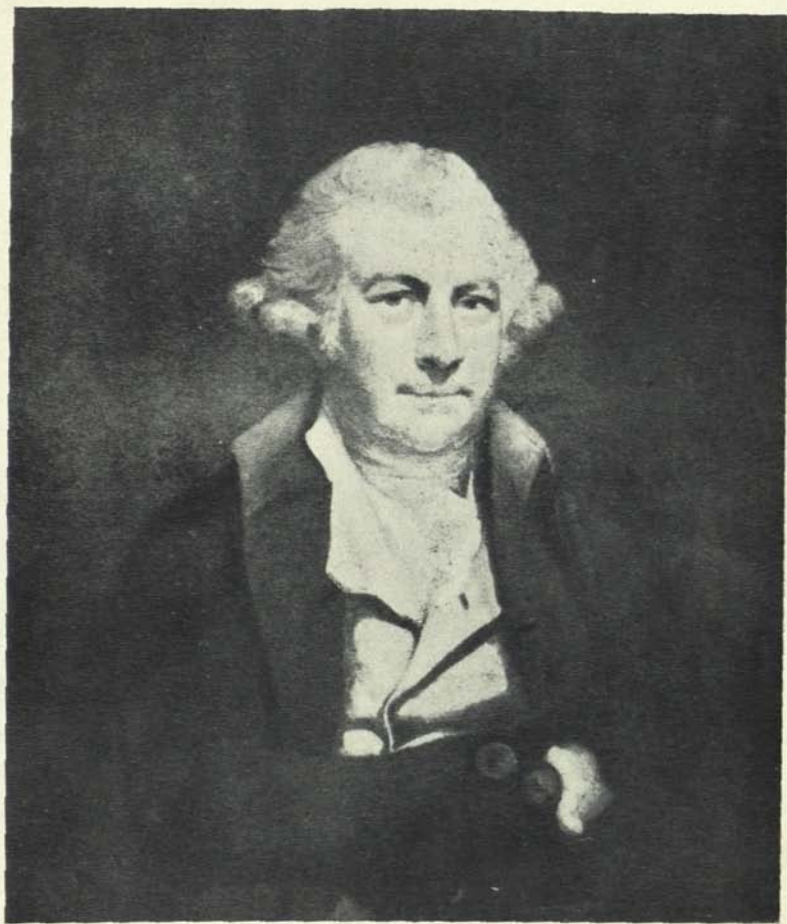
The part of Lady Teazle was played by Mrs Fanny Abington, whose popularity had recently somewhat declined, but who gave it a new and vigorous life by her performance of this part, so suitable to her talent, if not to her age.<sup>2</sup>

Mrs Abington was one of those actresses, so numerous in the eighteenth century, who, sprung from the dregs of the people, blossomed rapidly into brilliant ornaments of the polite world, and who charmed their audiences by their extreme elegance, their brisk, ready-witted command of dialogue, and their beautiful, costly clothes. By the time she was sixteen years old, little Fanny Barton, known as Nose-gay Fan because she haunted the London taverns selling flowers, had known pretty nearly every experience that the vicissitudes of a long life may bring to a more ordinary woman; experience for the most part of the dark side of life—hunger, want, low and sordid love-affairs—but bringing with it the power of fending for herself and the gift of a ready tongue that could give as good as she got in any exchange. She went on the stage very early, and toured widely with strolling companies; but it was only on her appearance for the second time at Drury Lane under Garrick that she developed her full powers and established herself for a time as the reigning queen of London theatrical fashion. She was neither pretty nor amiable; she had a sharp, high-pitched voice, and was completely devoid of the sweetness and sentiment which the English—

<sup>1</sup> King was born in 1730 and died in 1805. During most of his career he was attached to Drury Lane, where he succeeded Thomas Sheridan as stage-manager. Like most other actors, however, he had played in the provinces for a number of years.

<sup>2</sup> Mrs Abington was born in 1737 and died in 1815.





6.—Gentleman Smith (p. 14).



and others also for that matter—prize so highly in a woman. But she was smart, piquante, and ready-tongued to a degree; she could deliver a witty speech so that it went straight to the mark; and Garrick managed to utilize her talent to the best advantage, by casting her for the parts of society ladies whose characteristics much resembled her own. In return, by her incredible arrogance and caprice, she made herself his worst tormentress. She had intended to retire from the stage at the same time as Garrick, but finally remained on under Sheridan, and in his first season found in Lady Teazle the part with which her name is most indissolubly connected.<sup>1</sup>

As a matter of fact Mrs Abington was not young enough for the part—she was over forty when she played it for the first time, only a few years younger than King, who played Sir Peter. But all witnesses agree that in her own way she was perfect, that the rôle exactly suited her peculiar qualities. It is true she did not bring out the countrified innocence which underlies in the character the external veneer of worldly frivolity. The wit and sophistication of her Lady Teazle were, one may be sure, deeper in grain than Sheridan had conceived them, but, such as she was, she enchanted the whole theatrical public of the time, and her impersonation established itself as the traditional model for future times of how such parts should be played.<sup>2</sup>

The other chief characters were all in the hands of the public favourites of the hour, and fitted them as if they had been written for them, as indeed they very likely were.

The flighty, elegant and irresistibly amiable Charles Surface was played by William Smith, also too old in

<sup>1</sup> She had already, earlier in the season, played Lydia Languish in Sheridan's *Rivals*, and Miss Hoyden in his *A Trip to Scarborough*, an adaptation of Vanbrugh's *The Relapse*.

<sup>2</sup> Later, however, Mrs Jordan tried to present the character in a manner more in accordance with Sir Peter's sketch of his wife as she was before their marriage. In Denmark, where, since 1784, *The School for Scandal* has had a place in the standing repertory of the Royal Theatre, it may be said that only Fru Heiberg has really succeeded in holding the balance between the two sides of the character, while her successors inclined one to the one side, one to the other: Fru Eckardt being more of the coquettish Society lady, Fru Bloch of the innocent country girl.



years for the character,<sup>1</sup> but a warm favourite with the public in *jeune premier* parts. He was always known as 'Gentleman' Smith, not only on account of his line of parts, but also because he was the son of a city merchant and had been educated at Eton, the most aristocratic school in the country, an upbringing in strong contrast with that of most of his colleagues. As, in addition, he was married to the daughter of a Viscount, had private means, and was noted for his elegant manners and his pretty taste in dress, he had everything to qualify him as the ideal representative of the amiable young scapegrace of the stage.<sup>2</sup>

A somewhat similar type was John Palmer,<sup>3</sup> a much younger man, who succeeded Smith in *jeune premier* parts. In *The School for Scandal* he played Joseph Surface. He had a good figure and finely cut features, a careless and easy-going elegance of bearing, and the sort of insinuating amiability that rings a trifle false—all qualities well-suited to the part of the fascinating and hypocritical Joseph.<sup>4</sup>

Yates<sup>5</sup> and Parsons, whom Horace Walpole singles out for mention in his letter, were two popular actors, both in the line of comic old men, but of rather differing types. While Yates belonged to the older, somewhat coarse-grained school, and was consequently the bluff, downright Sir Oliver Surface to the life, Parsons possessed more refinement of style, and a sharper, more modern vein of comedy, and was thus excellently suited to the part allotted to him, the malicious scandal-monger Crabtree.

Lastly, the part of Sir Benjamin Backbite fell as a matter of course to James Dodd, the acknowledged darling of the public as the impersonator of the more or less idiotic coxcombs, the brainless idlers, lineal descendants

<sup>1</sup> Smith was born about 1730 and died in 1819.

<sup>2</sup> Gentleman Smith did not confine himself to this line of business, though characters of the Charles Surface type were those with which he was chiefly identified. He even ventured on the part of Richard III., and played it not without effect.

<sup>3</sup> John Palmer was born about 1742 and died in 1798.

<sup>4</sup> This part seems to have become a second nature with him. After a dispute with Sheridan he came up to the manager with great meekness, his hand on his heart, saying: "If you could but see my heart, Mr Sheridan. . . ." Sheridan drily interrupted him: "Why, Jack; you forget that I wrote it."

<sup>5</sup> Richard Yates was born at the beginning of the century, about 1706 and died in 1796.



7.—Yates as The Miser (*L'Avarre*).



8.—Palmer and Miss Hopkins (pp. 14 and 15).







of Lord Foppington,<sup>1</sup> without one of whom no comedy was complete. In the art of wearing an ultra-fashionable costume, poising a cane, offering his porcelain snuff-box and helping himself to a pinch, he stood unrivalled.

Besides Mrs Abington the cast included, on the female side, the excellent comic actress Miss Pope, Kitty Clive's only true successor.<sup>2</sup> She was a true child of the theatre, and particularly of the Drury Lane Theatre, where her father held the post of wig-maker, and where she was a member of the company from her fourteenth to her sixty-sixth year. In early youth she played the merry young ladies' and chambermaids' rôles, but soon passed on from these to become a remarkably finished interpreter of the parts of elderly ladies dowered with every variety of comic eccentricity in which English comedy is so rich. Mrs Candour fell to her as of right, and this, with Mrs Heidelberg in *The Clandestine Marriage* (by George Colman and David Garrick), was among her very best parts.

The somewhat tiresome part of the young heroine Maria may also be said to have fallen into suitable hands, since it was played by the at least equally tiresome Miss Hopkins, of whom it was remarked that she never was known to draw either a smile or a tear from her audience. She was the daughter of the Drury Lane prompter, and afterwards became John Kemble's wife, without thereby becoming in any notable degree a better actress.

It will be seen that the body of players with whom Sheridan opened his career as a manager, while very far from being a bad one, was essentially a company of comedians, and was very weak on the side of tragedy and Shakespearean drama, which still remained the criterion of great acting. There was indeed no touch of greatness about this polished period of decline. It was a facile, elegant world, with good manners and good clothes, sharp-tongued and witty, and not without sentimental

<sup>1</sup> As regards the Lord Foppington-type, so popular on the stage till well on in the nineteenth century, see vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*) p. 352.

<sup>2</sup> For Kitty Clive, see vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*) pp. 373-4. Jane Pope, who never married, was born in 1742 and died in 1818. She retired in 1808.



leanings ; eminently fitted for the brilliant presentation of lightly-touched, elegant comedy, but containing absolutely no one, whether man or woman, capable of going below the surface in search of the deeper things of the soul, the very existence of which seemed for the time to have been forgotten.

Of course the Drury Lane company included many other actors and actresses besides those who had taken part in the triumph of *The School for Scandal*, and made that piece the great theatrical event of the time. But none of these were of any greater mark. It was thought for a time that a great and versatile genius, a worthy successor to Garrick, had been discovered in a young man named Henderson, who had won his spurs in the provinces in several of the classical parts—Richard III., Macbeth, Benedick ; and Sheridan made haste to secure the new star immediately after his highly successful début in London, which took place at the little Haymarket Theatre, where George Colman, who had left Covent Garden, had now begun a very successful management.

John Henderson, at his first appearance on the boards of Drury Lane (30th September 1777), was thirty years of age. He had gone on the stage late in life, having been a silversmith in London till his twenty-fifth year, when he attracted Garrick's attention, and on his recommendation was engaged to appear at the Bath Theatre, which in those days served as a sort of preparatory school for the London stage. With characteristic caution he appeared under an assumed name, which he retained till his reputation as an actor was established. After five years at Bath, where he was the most popular member of the company, he at last found an opening in London. His début as Shylock at the Haymarket made a considerable sensation, and the performances of Hamlet and Falstaff which followed, aroused such enthusiasm that he began to be regarded as a worthy successor to the great Garrick himself.<sup>1</sup> As already stated, Sheridan at

<sup>1</sup> Garrick himself was not so enthusiastic. When he was asked his opinion after he had seen Henderson's début in *The Merchant of Venice*, he replied : "Well, *Tubal* was very creditably played indeed."



9.—John Henderson as Iago.





once engaged him, and he made his début at Drury Lane as Hamlet. It cannot justly be said that Henderson's career in this, the premier theatre in England, proved a disappointment. He filled not unworthily the place in the great repertory of classical parts which Garrick's retirement had left vacant. But he himself never developed into a Garrick. Garrick had been an originating genius, Henderson was merely a man of talent continuing an established tradition. And the continuation in this case proved too brief to leave any considerable mark. Henderson's health was delicate; only eight years had elapsed when he died, worn out, at the early age of thirty-eight. His name is held in high respect in English theatrical history, but it is clear that he was not a really great actor. His physical equipment was against him. His voice was weak and unresonant: his appearance insignificant and somewhat plebeian: his face, and especially his eyes, lacking in expression. Nor does it appear that on the intellectual side he made any important contribution to his art, or was able by originality of treatment to throw fresh light on the famous characters it fell to him to portray. He deserves all credit, however, as a diligent, thoughtful actor, who took his art seriously, and who evidently possessed that feeling for the great in theatrical art which was so conspicuously wanting in most of his contemporaries.

Another important recruit obtained by Sheridan from the Haymarket company was the bewitchingly beautiful Miss Farren. Mrs Abington had begun to run to seed a little, and was, besides, so excessively unreasonable and troublesome, even for a 'leading lady,' that it was exceedingly difficult to work with her.<sup>1</sup> It was thus only prudent on Sheridan's part to make sure of a fitting successor to replace her, and he could not have made a happier choice than the young and charming Elizabeth Farren.<sup>2</sup> True, she brought no new variety of talent to

<sup>1</sup> Mrs Abington, indeed, left Drury Lane a few years later (1782), and joined Covent Garden.

<sup>2</sup> She made her first appearance at Drury Lane (8th September 1778), as Charlotte Rusport in *The West Indian* (by Cumberland). She was then nineteen.



the company. She, too, was the elegant society lady of light comedy. But she far surpassed Mrs Abington in beauty and refinement, and had besides, what was wanting to her predecessor, a winning, softly musical voice. With no great command of feeling, she yet gave consummate expression to the ideal of feminine perfection prevailing in that over-refined transition period, her exquisite grace and restrained well-bred wit enrapturing the polite world who set the fashion in theatrical affairs. Horace Walpole, who had seen much, declared that she was the most perfect actress he had ever seen. Her theatrical career was not a very long one. She retired from the stage, when only thirty-eight years old, to marry the Earl of Derby—famous as the founder of the classic race—who had been her lover for many years previously, and whom the death of his first wife had recently set free.<sup>1</sup>

Sheridan's first years of theatrical management were in one sense very fortunate. His own plays were brilliantly successful; the additions made by him to the company were judicious; the world of fashion and elegance flocked to his theatre with delight. But recently a very poor man, he was now earning an income of thousands a year. Helped by his young and beautiful wife, he kept open house, entertaining with lavish hospitality. And being no less charming as host than he was witty and pleasant as boon-companion, he soon blossomed into one of the most popular and sought-after men in London.

But this wide and ceaseless sociability, which was and remained a necessity of existence for Sheridan, led to a dispersion of his interests, and diverted his energies and his talents from the theatre into other paths. His dramatic vein seemed to dry up. His only production after *The School for Scandal* was the gay little burlesque, *The Critic, or A Tragedy Rehearsed*, a witty parody of the modern French pseudo-classic tragedy, which had had a temporary vogue in England, though the attempts made to transplant

<sup>1</sup> She married Lord Derby in 1797, and lived as Lady Derby for many years, dying in 1829. It was she who trained her husband's grandson, Edward Stanley, Earl of Derby, the well-known statesman who abolished slavery, in the art of oratory, for his command of which he later became famous.



it had usually been without success, Sheridan himself, in the course of his management, having burnt his fingers on them.<sup>1</sup> Not even the extraordinary success which, in common with all his previous pieces, this amusing farce attained, served to rekindle his zest for dramatic authorship. As dramatist, from this time forward, he falls completely silent, except for the production many years after—in 1799—of an adaptation of Kotzebue's drama *Pizarro*—this too achieving a great stage-success.<sup>2</sup>

The fact of the matter was that he had been captured by politics. He had struck up a connection with politicians like Lord Townshend, and more especially Charles James Fox, whose intimate friend he soon became. He joined the Whig party, and in 1780 was returned to Parliament, where his brilliant eloquence, which had nothing theatrical about it, and his considerable practical ability soon made him one of the chief pillars of the party. But it was inevitable that the zeal with which he threw himself into his new career should react injuriously both on his talent as author and his activities as theatrical manager. In fact, as we have seen, his dramatic talent died away completely, while the theatre came more and more to be to him a mere source of income, to the increase of whose productivity he now and again devoted a passing attention, but which he left for the most part to the care of others, chiefly the members of his own family. Not, however, that this was the view he himself took of the matter. It was his greatest ambition to be a first-rate theatrical manager, while he regarded with a natural, and sometimes strongly expressed, disgust the tricks and subterfuges of parliamentary politics. None the less, by a singular irony of fate, it came to pass that he devoted nearly the whole of his energies to his political career, while the happy-go-lucky unconcern with which he managed his theatre may be gauged by the fact that, excellent judge as he was both of plays and acting, he never read through himself

<sup>1</sup> For example with Voltaire's *Semiramis*, which was one of the first pieces produced by him.

<sup>2</sup> No fewer than twenty-nine editions of it were published, and the chief part (Rolla) was a standing dish in the repertories of the great actors Kemble and Kean.

the pieces submitted for his acceptance, and hardly knew by sight the actors who appeared upon his stage.<sup>1</sup>

Though he left nearly all the work to others—except the work of raising money, an operation in which he was as adroit and efficient as he was lavish in spending it—he was yet unwilling to delegate to his assistants the authority necessary for the control of their departments; the natural result being that great disorder and indiscipline prevailed in the daily working and interior economy of the theatre.

By appointing his father as stage-manager he had saddled himself with an incubus. The elder Sheridan was beyond question a man of probity and of culture, but he was at the same time most pedantic, most old-fashioned, much too intensely convinced of his own infallibility, and, worst of all, morbidly jealous of his son's genius and good fortune. As already mentioned, he had committed at the outset a stupid blunder by repulsing Garrick, of whom he was likewise jealous, with an arrogance which could not fail to strike the whole company as ludicrous to the last degree. He had been all his days a mediocre actor, of the bombastic-declamatory school, and to his intense disgust, though doubtless most fortunately for the public, he was now absolutely debarred from acting, his appointment as stage-manager having been made on that express condition. This prohibition exasperated his natural bitterness, and he constantly did all he could to thwart his son's plans, thereby incidentally undermining his own authority and the discipline which Garrick's firm and masterful leadership had built up. Small wonder that the embittered old actor's reign lasted only three years. He was obliged to resign his post to King,<sup>2</sup> who proved an exceedingly

<sup>1</sup> He is said to have come down to the theatre after a good dinner, and, after standing for a moment in the wings listening, to have said to some of his actors: "Who is that on the stage?", adding immediately: "Don't let him ever act again."

<sup>2</sup> With what feelings the elder Sheridan left his son's theatre we may gather from his remarks of a few years later, in a letter to his eldest son, Charles Francis (quoted by Fraser Rae: *Sheridan* II. 4). He writes:

"... At length a scene opened which promised better days. Garrick's retiring, whose jealousy had long shut the London theatres against me, such an open(ing) was made for me both as manager and actor as might soon have retrieved my affairs, and in no long space of time have placed me in easy



conscientious, though not an inspired, stage-manager, but who had great difficulty in maintaining his authority in face of his manager's intellectual superiority and habit of capricious, though never unamiable, interference.

Thus did the great theatre, after Garrick's retirement, go veering before the wind, without steady ballast, without plan, without discipline, and without a commander able to gather his actors round him like a well-trained crew and direct them to a definite goal.

circumstances. But here a son of mine steps into possession, whose first step was to exclude me wholly from having any share in it. Afterwards when by extreme ill conduct they were threatened with ruin, he agreed to put the management into my hands on condition that I should not appear as a performer. . . . I desire to know whether, if the theatre of Drury Lane had fallen into the hands of the worst enemy I had in the world, determined upon ruining me and my family, he could have taken more effectual means of doing it, than those which have been pursued by my own son."



## THE KEMBLE SCHOOL

### I

The Kemble family of Actors—Mrs Siddons' triumph in London—John Philip Kemble and the Classic School—Art of Mrs Siddons. Her Lady Macbeth—John Kemble as Hamlet and Cardinal Wolsey—Victorious progress of the Classic School.

SHERIDAN'S period of activity as a theatrical manager was a long one; it extended to thirty-two years, and it was not with his consent that it then came to an end.<sup>1</sup> During this long period of years much of course came to pass; there were good years and bad years, great successes and great disappointments, but what most concerns posterity is that during this period and at this theatre English theatrical art developed new methods and a new direction. This was not owing to any influence of Sheridan's, but to a change in the popular taste of the times; and the instruments of this new current of taste were found in a family of actors who became and continued for many years the ruling force in English theatrical life, and especially in two of its members: John Philip Kemble and his sister Sarah Siddons.

The great theatrical clan of the Kembles took its rise from a strolling provincial actor—originally a hairdresser, later a theatrical manager—Roger Kemble,<sup>2</sup> and his wife Sarah Ward, daughter of the Irish manager John Ward. This worthy and handsome couple had twelve children, of whom more than half went on the stage. As these again married actors and actresses and produced a new generation of Kembles who in their turn joined the

<sup>1</sup> It was after the destruction by fire (1809) of the theatre built by him in 1794 that Sheridan was excluded from the management of the new theatre. The details of the affair are given below.

<sup>2</sup> Born 1721, died 1802. The brother and sister would seem to have inherited their talent from their mother. The father was a bad actor, though a handsome and estimable man.



10. — Mrs Sarah Siddons.

*[From the painting by Thomas Gainsborough.]*





profession, there would have been good grounds for speaking of the Kemble School, simply on account of the cumulative effect of numbers, even if none of this prolific family had been remarkable for talent or genius. How much more so when, as was actually the case, one at least of the family possessed great genius, and another achieved importance and distinction, if only by the tenacity and vigour with which he adhered to and enforced his artistic theories.

The genius of the family was Roger Kemble's eldest child, Sarah; the forceful and tenacious spirit who made the Kemble name itself famous was the eldest son, John Philip.<sup>1</sup>

Both of them—and for that matter their younger brothers and sisters as well—were early broken to the stage as junior members of their parents' touring company, in which, as a matter of course, the whole family made itself useful;<sup>2</sup> by the time they were ten or twelve years old they had already appeared in a great variety of parts. The parents, however, had the good sense to break off their children's theatrical career in good time and arrange for their receiving a proper education. The boy was entered, at ten years old, in a Roman Catholic school, with a view to his studying for the priesthood; and the twelve-year-old Sarah was also sent to a good school, where she received a sound education. At a very early age she became engaged to Henry Siddons, a handsome young actor without a spark of talent; an entanglement which was very unwelcome to her mother, and which led

<sup>1</sup> Both sister and brother came into the world in the course of their parents' wandering life as touring players. Sarah was born in an inn at Brecknock (Wales) on 5th July 1755; John Philip, also in an inn, at Prescott (Lancashire), 1st February 1757.

<sup>2</sup> The eccentric writer William Combe, author of *Dr Syntax's Tour*, had at that time, in consequence of temporary pecuniary embarrassment, enlisted as a private soldier, and happened to be quartered in a certain inn when the Kemble family came there. The private soldier greatly amazed and impressed the guests at the inn by talking Greek and Latin, and Roger Kemble was so struck by him that he engaged him as tutor to his young and talented daughter, Sarah, a relation which, however, did not last long—doubtless a fortunate circumstance for one of the parties. Combe, however, used to say later, when his pupil had become the great, renowned Mrs Siddons, that his first memory of her upon the stage was seeing her standing in the wings rubbing a pair of snuffers on a brass candlestick to counterfeit the noise of a windmill.



to the dismissal of Siddons from the company, while Miss Sarah was sent to a place as lady's maid in a wealthy family.<sup>1</sup> She remained faithful, however, to her handsome lover; the parents' consent was at last obtained, and at eighteen years of age she became Mrs Siddons. The young couple now rejoined Roger Kemble's company, she as the popular 'leading lady,' he in the humble sphere of general utility.

Meanwhile her brother, John Philip, had entered the French Seminary at Douai, where he received excellent instruction and made good progress in his studies, but without developing any vocation for the priesthood. His clerical upbringing had no doubt considerable influence on him through life, and coloured his later professional career. At any rate his acting, both in diction and in gesture, was marked throughout by a certain priestly solemnity and measured deliberation which could not fail to bring to mind his education as the Douai seminarist.

At eighteen years old he left the Seminary, determined, in spite of his father's opposition, to become an actor. Refused by his father, he sought and obtained an engagement in another touring company.

Meanwhile Sarah Siddons was playing as *prima donna assoluta* in her father's troupe, with so much success that her provincial reputation soon penetrated to London, and one fine day Garrick despatched his trusted adviser, Thomas King, to see and report on her playing. The report was so favourable that Garrick offered the young actress an engagement at five pounds a week, which she gladly accepted. On the 29th December 1775—almost at the same time as her brother left the Seminary for the stage—she made her formal début at Drury Lane, as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.

At this time Mrs Siddons was twenty years old. Beautiful as she was, and refined in appearance, she was yet most unlike the type, compounded of lady of fashion and stage-queen, which in 1775 was still in vogue. She

<sup>1</sup> In later years, when Mrs Siddons had become queen of the stage, her worshippers would have been glad to conceal this circumstance, and indeed her early biographers regard it as so terrible that they scarcely dare refer to it. But a lady's maid she was.



was very tall, and still so slender as to seem almost bony;<sup>1</sup> and she moved, as a natural consequence, with a certain slowness and angularity. Her face was of a noble but somewhat severe and cold beauty, her features large, her eyebrows black and strongly marked, her mouth nobly formed, and her eyes large and grave—in short she was the very reverse of the petite, lively, elegant figure in rococo style, with boldly developed bust, laughing cherry lips, and coquettish eyes, which the fashion of the period had made its ideal. The prevailing style of dress, with its short, hooped skirt, its paniers, its high, pointed heels, must have been most unbecoming to her. She was formed by nature for the draperies of tragedy, but as yet she either did not know how to choose the style of costume that suited her, or had not sufficient authority to impose her taste. Her voice, trained to the acoustics of the small provincial theatres, sounded thin and indistinct in the great spaces of Drury Lane.<sup>2</sup> No wonder, then, that her début was unsuccessful, and that none, or hardly any one, was able to discern her special gifts. It was not to be expected that she should attract the favour and patronage of any of the noblemen or politicians, amateurs of the theatre, who sometimes used their wealth and interest to launch young débutantes, for she was no complaisant little actress, ready for a flirtation in the wings or the green-room. On the erotic side she was unapproachable; the saying went that you would as soon think of making love to the Archbishop of Canterbury as to her.

Garrick, who was probably the only person who saw clearly what she might come to be, retired from management at the end of the season, and the public gave her no support. Her last rôle in this year of her début was Lady Anne in *Richard III.*, a part which should have suited her well. But by this time she had lost heart, and

<sup>1</sup> Afterwards her figure filled out; and in her later years she became exceedingly stout.

<sup>2</sup> Though the Drury Lane of 1775 was not nearly so large as it was when rebuilt by Sheridan in 1794, it yet could seat an audience of 2000. All the critics of the day, including even the few who praised her, mentioned as a serious defect her feeble voice, which made it quite impossible to hear some of her speeches.



she made even less impression in this than in her earlier comedy rôles.

When Sheridan took over the theatre, he declined to renew her engagement; and after this single unsuccessful season she left Drury Lane with bitter resentment in her heart (directed, with an actress's usual unreasonableness, mainly against Garrick), and returned to the provincial stage.

The next seven years, spent in touring throughout the provinces, were years of development, in which her character ripened and matured, and she advanced in mastery of her art, and constantly extended and confirmed her popularity with provincial audiences—particularly at fashionable Bath. Thus when she returned to London it was as a mature artist, conscious of her aims and confident in her powers. Her second début at Drury Lane—10th October 1782—was accordingly a triumph which made her at one blow the first tragic actress in England; and her conquest of the fashionable world of the theatre was now as complete as its previous neglect of her had been.

This revolution in the fortunes of the actress was due not only to her own progress as an artist, but also, quite as much, to a turn in the tide of public feeling and taste. The tone of light, cool scepticism, of smooth yet sparkling wit, of polite repression and concealment of all feeling, had long since given way to a certain vague sentimentalism. But the feeling for the tears of things was still on the increase. As if with a foreboding of the mighty events that were soon to convulse Europe, art was turning to the treatment of the simpler, greater emotions, to deep sorrow, lofty simplicity, noble resignation.

Whereas, earlier in the century, tragedy had produced most of its effects by sudden transitions from polished elegance to violent outbursts of passion, exciting rather than moving the spectators, the new age had begun to look for a more evenly maintained pathos, an uninterrupted, penetrating seriousness, a plastic solemnity, informing the whole performance, and a mastery of feeling, capable of drawing warm floods of tears down cheeks recently so cool and dry beneath their powder.



II.—Mrs Siddons.

*[From the painting by Sir W. Beechey.]*





To this change in the public taste, of which the public itself was still but half conscious, and which only attained to clear self-consciousness in the ideals of the great French Revolution, with their demand for classic elevation and Roman civic virtue,—to this change Sarah Siddons and her brother were the first to give expression in the world of the theatre.

No one who saw Mrs Siddons on that memorable evening when, as *Isabella*,<sup>1</sup> she melted the vast critical London audience into floods of tears, could doubt for a moment that he had before him a great actress; no one but those who had been present at Garrick's début forty-one years before had ever known an evening of such enthusiasm in a theatre.

At the time, however, no one seems to have realized that, as in the case of Garrick's first appearance, this evening marked the beginning of a new era in the art of acting. The press of the day abounded in eulogy, the critics laid great stress on the actress's 'noble appearance,' her 'classic profile,'<sup>2</sup> the simplicity of her expression of grief; while remarking on a certain monotony in her playing. But the profound differences between her and her nearest predecessors, the marked peculiarities of temperament, of external appearance, of diction, which made her in a real sense the founder of a new school, the initiator of the 'classic' style, seem at first to have escaped remark. Perhaps the secret of the matter was that she herself had no consciousness of any great novelty of method. In those days the recipe now followed for innovations in art—first invent a name suitable for a new 'school,' then think out a number of peculiar tenets in some degree corresponding to the name, and finally set about enlisting proselytes for the new movement—was not yet in vogue. Mrs Siddons had ambition, talent and intelligence in a high

<sup>1</sup> In Southern's tragedy *The Fatal Marriage*, an old, very popular play (dating from 1694) which Garrick had adapted to the taste of the time, and which now went under the name of *Isabella*. It remained one of Mrs Siddons' best parts.

<sup>2</sup> It was in fact only in this connection that the word 'classic' was used. And yet her profile was perhaps the least 'classic' thing about her. Both her nose and her chin, as Horace Walpole quite rightly remarked (*Letters*, xii. 357), were, according to Greek standards, distinctly too large.



degree; her peculiar natural gifts, both bodily and mental, eminently fitted her to be the leader of a new development in her art. But, unlike Garrick in his day, she would seem to have had no distinct consciousness of breaking with the old, and initiating a new, order.

It was reserved for her brother, John Philip, who had more intuition in matters of theory, more personal idiosyncracies, but far less natural genius than his sister, to give clear and systematic expression to the principles of the new school.

John Kemble, after leaving the Douai Seminary, had found considerable difficulty in making his way as an actor, even on the provincial stage. In spite of his culture, his handsome figure, his correct and gentlemanlike appearance and manners, he had no great success with the theatrical public. He was looked on as a somewhat stiff and tedious performer—and it is undeniable that both then and throughout his career there was justice in the complaint. At the same time the young man possessed qualities—a seriousness, partly inborn, in part acquired by training, an imperturbable stateliness and a plastic grace—that made it impossible to pass him by unnoticed. His very appearance and figure, which much resembled his sister's, seemed to mark him out in advance as a leader of men. He was very tall, very dark, with the same large nobly-cut features as Sarah Siddons, and the same beautiful, deep eyes. But his temperament had no spark of her fire and passion. He was not without feeling, but his feeling found expression in diction, gesture and movement so deliberate and restrained that it often produced the effect of mere sluggishness; he was not without humour, but his humour was so absolutely lacking in any touch of nimbleness, and went so ill with his solemnity and unchanging beauty of countenance, that it rarely succeeded in stirring his audience to laughter. He had great courage and still greater tenacity, and these qualities, harmonizing as they did with his imperturbable, almost indifferent composure, were clearly those to which he gave the surest and best expression on the stage and by which he made the strongest impression on the British public,

to whom just these qualities have always appealed as the attributes of an ideal man.

At the time of his sister's second, brilliantly successful début in London, John Kemble had an engagement in Dublin, where he had worked his way into the front rank of the company at the well-known Smock Alley Theatre, managed by the Irishman, Daly, and was playing in an extensive range of parts—much too varied for his powers—making now a success, and again a failure.

After her first triumphant season had brought London to her feet, his sister came over to Dublin and appeared along with him at the Smock Alley Theatre as a visiting star. Her visit was a success, but it would seem that there was no real sympathy between her and the Irish public. She writes about the Irish in a letter to a friend<sup>1</sup>:

" . . . I like not the people either " (she has been writing of the dirt and untidiness of Dublin) ; " they are all ostentation and insincerity, and in their ideas of finery very like the French, but not so cleanly ; and they not only speak but think coarsely. This is in confidence ; therefore, your fingers on your lips, I pray. They are tenacious of their country to a degree of folly that is very laughable, and would call me the blackest of ingrates were they to know my sentiments of them. I have got a thousand pounds among them this summer. I always acknowledge myself obliged to them, but I cannot love them."

It is clear enough from these utterances that, while the public had flocked to see the newly-risen star, there was no real hearty liking between her and her Irish audiences ; and it becomes still more clearly evident, from jeering newspaper articles of the time, that the solemn, severe art of the Kemble school was incapable—except as a momentary sensation—of making any real appeal to the lively, variable, laughter-loving Irish public. Thus, in an article combining mock criticism with a parody of the manager's methods of advertising, we read : " On Saturday, Mrs Siddons, about whom all the world has been talking, exposed her beautiful, adamantine, soft and comely person, for the first time, in the Theatre Royal, Smock Alley. The house was crowded

<sup>1</sup> Mr Whalley : letter quoted by Fitzgerald : *The Kembles*, i. 138.



with hundreds more than it could hold, with thousands of admiring spectators that went away without a sight. . . . Several fainted, even before the curtain drew up. . . . The fiddlers in the orchestra blubbered like hungry children crying for their bread and butter; and when the bell rang for the music between the acts, the tears ran from the bassoon player's eyes in such showers, that they choked the finger stops, and [made] a spout of the instrument. . . . The briny pond in the pit was three feet deep, and the people that were obliged to stand upon the benches were in that position up to their ankles in tears. An Act of Parliament against her playing will certainly pass, for she has infected the volunteers, and they sit reading *The Fatal Marriage*, crying and roaring all the time. . . ."

Heartily tired of this gibe-loving, malicious public, Mrs Siddons left Dublin, taking her brother with her to Drury Lane, where he obtained an engagement, and made his début as Hamlet—30th September 1783. He at once impressed the public by his unusually handsome face, his manly figure, and his great authority and restraint; and astonished the critics by the many new 'readings' and novelties of emphasis and interpretation which his diligent study of the text had enabled him to think out in this most famous of all stage parts. For Kemble was not—and this was at once recognized—a mere declamatory actor, taking hold of a part at one end and reeling it off till he arrived at the other end, without much more trouble to himself than the mere physical exertion, and without other profit to his audience than that of getting through the whole of the part. His presentation of a character was always thoroughly worked out, often indeed too thoroughly, in the sense that the work showed too clearly, and that essentials became confused with inessentials owing to the too great attention and prominence given to the latter.

He was immeasurably superior to that most abhorrent type of actor who lives and flourishes upon the mere exploitation of a handsome presence and an untiring pair of lungs. But as an impersonator of human beings he had a serious, though not very uncommon, defect—he was able to impersonate only one human being, to wit, himself, John

Philip Kemble. Whether his part was that of a dusky Moor, a white-haired old man, a ragged vagabond, or a dandified fine gentleman, it was always a case of John Philip Kemble demonstrating to his audience how a Moor, an old man, a vagabond or a fine gentleman ought to live and move and have his being, not of these various personages themselves living and moving before the eyes of the audience. And as it happened that John Philip Kemble was a dignified, serious, classically handsome but somewhat stiff and pedantic person, his impersonations only approached perfection in cases in which these qualities stood him in stead by harmonizing with those of the personages he had to represent.

They were of course very far from harmonizing in the case of the character of Hamlet. The welter of changing moods, the distraction of feeling, the sudden veering shifts of thought, the constant attempts at self-concealment under a mask of words and of inconsequent actions, that make the interpretation of the part of Hamlet so tempting to every actor and so unattainable by any but the born genius—all this belonged to a domain forever barred and inaccessible to a talent so incapable of variety as Kemble's. Thus his Hamlet was little more than a beautiful lifeless picture; he moved through the part like a graceful minuet-dancer, who knows all the figures thoroughly and never for a moment loses the stately measure. Ludwig Tieck, whose judgment carries weight both because of his thorough knowledge of Shakespeare, and because as a foreigner he looked with fresh and impartial eyes at English theatrical art, says of Kemble's Hamlet:<sup>1</sup> "It was above all the plaintive melancholy, the noble suffering in the part that Kemble brought out: he wept much and too often; many scenes, for example the scene with the players,<sup>2</sup> he spoke

<sup>1</sup> *Dramaturgische Blätter*, ii. 160. Tieck did not see Kemble till 1817, when the actor was sixty years old. But we can hardly doubt that the fundamental conception and the style of execution of the performance as he saw it were the same as when Kemble made his début at Drury Lane as a young actor of twenty-six.

<sup>2</sup> Kemble had omitted this scene on his first appearance, probably because, as a young beginner, he was shy of making himself the mouthpiece of satire which might not have left the withers of some of his older colleagues unwrung; but he very soon restored the scene to his acting version.



excellently, and he moved and bore himself throughout with a manly dignity. But in this case, as always, hardly any difference was made between the lighter and the graver parts of the drama; and again, it was impossible to distinguish at any point between prose and verse. The great scenes of passion seemed almost insignificant; the scene with the Ghost at any rate produced no effect whatever.

"At such points as the beginning of the first soliloquy :

'O that this too, too solid flesh would melt,'

Kemble draws out the 'O' for some seconds with a strong tremolo.

"At the words 'the rugged Pyrrhus,' where Hamlet says : 'If it live in your memory, begin at this line—let me see, let me see :—

"The rugged Pyrrhus, like the Hyrcanian beast"—

it is not so ;—it begins with Pyrrhus—'

there was again<sup>1</sup> general, resounding applause throughout the theatre, because this casting about for the beginning of the speech, this lapse of memory, was expressed in such a natural manner. And certainly, when one has been listening for a considerable time to slowly-moving, monotonously plaintive rhythms, punctuated at regular intervals by long pauses, it comes as an unusually effective surprise to hear again suddenly the natural tones of everyday life in the ordinary dialogue form."

The English theatrical criticism of the time was fully alive to these and other similar objections to Kemble's style; and saw clearly the difference between Sarah Siddons' inborn tragic temperament, kindling with its sparks the imagination of her hearers, and John Kemble's dignified, elaborate manner, flowing like an even, glassy stream, the very negation of all impetuosity and fire. But on his own merits, such as they were, he too obtained acceptance, and in course of time acquired great influence.

The brother and sister soon took a dominating position in the tragic repertory of the theatre; and when

<sup>1</sup> Tieck had noticed on several occasions that, when Kemble for once in a way abandoned his usual solemn sermonizing tone and made a sudden change into an everyday mode of speech, the transition always drew loud applause from the audience.





12.—John Kemble as Hamlet.  
[3rd Act.]



13.—John Kemble as Coriolanus (p. 38).



14.—John Kemble as Cardinal Wolsey (p. 36).



in 1788 Thomas King resigned the stage-management, Kemble, who had become a friend and ardent admirer of Sheridan's, succeeded to the post. King had been unable to get on with Sheridan, who, in his own easy-going amiable way, played the tyrant to his stage-manager, giving him much responsibility and little power, till at last King threw up his appointment in sheer disgust, declaring publicly that he had been left so completely without authority in his department that he "could not have a costume cleaned, or order a yard of imitation gold-lace to trim it with; things which it must be allowed were often badly needed."

John Kemble was better fitted to inspire respect both in Sheridan and in the members of the company. There was about him an inborn, natural authority which fitted him to command. He was upright and courageous too, and held well-defined theories and ideas on dramatic art in general and the art of stage-setting in particular. It need not surprise us then, even if we hold his theories and ideas to have been faulty in themselves, that he acquired a position of great power and influence in the theatrical life of the time, and was able to establish firmly a style of stage presentation, chiefly distinguished by a rich stateliness, a measured nobility, a dignified solemnity, which no doubt came perilously near the borders of the *genre* which Voltaire considered the only inadmissible one, but which yet undeniably bore the stamp of seriousness and plastic beauty, things which had long been absent from the theatre.

With Sheridan, as was inevitable in dealing with such a lax and unbusiness-like manager, he had many disagreements; but though Kemble in private life, as on the stage, had a temperament somewhat inclined to stiffness and tragic gloom, Sheridan was always able to appease his resentment, mainly because Kemble in his heart had an admiration not far short of idolatry for his manager's easy, brilliant endowments and bright, gay disposition. They thus managed to hold together, in spite of innumerable quarrels, till 1802. By that time Sheridan, who had gradually made it a fixed principle never willingly, and as seldom as possible under compulsion, to pay what he owed,



had wounded his friend so often and so deeply in money matters, a specially tender point both with Kemble and his sister, that it became inevitable that they should part.

But in John Kemble's long reign as stage-manager of Drury Lane he accomplished much towards the establishment of his principles. Not much of any value was being written during those years in the higher drama, and his efforts were thus naturally directed mainly towards the production of Shakespeare. Amongst other achievements he placed to his credit a production of *Macbeth* marked by a great advance in appropriateness and magnificence of setting, which furnished his sister with one of her best and most admired parts in *Lady Macbeth*.

Mrs Siddons' conception of this famous figure, so terrible in its truth—a conception which she has left on record in one of a series of notes on her parts—is especially interesting as embodying the true Kemble attitude towards art, in its striving for the attainment of nobility, beauty, elevation, at any and all costs. She sees in *Lady Macbeth* first and foremost a devoted wife, loving her husband and loved by him, a beautiful and intelligent woman, who is driven to crime by ambition—on behalf of her beloved husband—and who, after the commission of the crime, suffers as terribly as he from the pangs of conscience.

It is still more interesting, however, to note that this strained reading of the part differs completely from the conception that her impulsive, temperamental genius forced her to carry out on the stage. All contemporary witnesses agree that from the very beginning and throughout the play she presented, with fearful, appalling clearness, a recklessly ambitious, coldly passionate woman, without scruple, without remorse, without feeling for anything but herself, driving her husband relentlessly forward to the goal she has set before him. In her very first scene, where *Lady Macbeth*, after the reading of her husband's letter, says:

"Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and *shalt be*  
What thou art promised,"

she uttered the words "*shalt be*" with such violent, such

truly terrible energy, as at once to give the key to the woman's character and to the idea of the whole drama.

In the sleep-walking scene she produced a great and thrilling effect, and one quite new to the public of the day, since to obtain it she had the courage to break with an old tradition. In the text of the play the well-known stage-direction runs: "Enter Lady Macbeth, with a taper." The earlier representatives of the part, including the much-admired Mrs Pritchard,<sup>1</sup> had gone through the whole scene faithfully carrying round this 'taper' in its elegant candlestick, and it was looked on as a fool-hardy innovation, nay almost as a piece of sacrilege that might well be fatal to the success of the performance, when Mrs Siddons declared at rehearsal her intention of setting down this time-honoured candlestick on a table. She carried her point, however, thereby making possible much greater variety in her by-play, gaining the 'free hands' so necessary in this scene, and producing a dramatic effect far greater than her predecessors had attained.

The only points in which Mrs Siddons seems to have followed her theoretic conception in the actual stage presentation of the part were her external appearance—her Lady Macbeth, at least in the years when she first played the part,<sup>2</sup> was a beautiful young woman, a delicate blonde—and a single speech, on which she herself laid much stress, and by which, in her view, the lady's originally gentle and loving disposition was unmistakably shown. This was the passage where Lady Macbeth says:

"Had he not resembled  
My father as he slept, I had done't."

Mrs Siddons charged this speech with a wealth of filial tenderness which moved the spectators deeply, and aroused the critics' warmest admiration. It is hardly necessary, at the present day, to point out that this is an exceedingly forced interpretation.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*) p. 388.

<sup>2</sup> It is certain that, in the course of her long stage career, Mrs Siddons made many changes both in her playing and in the costumes of her characters.



Another Shakespearean revival by which John Kemble rendered good service was his production of *Henry VIII*. He staged it, for one thing, for the first time for many years, with the magnificence of mounting and of pageantry appropriate to a festival play written for the glorification of Queen Elizabeth; and, more important still, he was able to extract from it a degree of dramatic beauty which had probably never been attained by previous performances, even in Shakespeare's time. Much of his success, it is true, was again due to the help of his sister, whose performance of the unhappy Queen Katherine was perfection itself. The beauty and nobility, the deep grief and calm resignation with which Mrs Siddons managed to inform this short part aroused the greatest admiration, and many considered her Queen Katherine as great an achievement as her Lady Macbeth.

But John Kemble himself, too, found in Cardinal Wolsey<sup>1</sup> one of the parts which suited his style, and which went far towards justifying himself and others in believing that he was a great actor. He was ordinarily incapable of entering in imagination into a character foreign to his own temperament, of "getting into its skin" as the saying goes. As a contemporary critic<sup>2</sup> wittily said of him:

"He is chiefly afraid of being contaminated by too close an identity with the characters he represents. . . . He endeavours to raise Nature to the dignity of his own person and demeanour, and declines, with a graceful smile and a wave of the hand, the ordinary services she might do him."<sup>3</sup>

But the qualities and feelings which characterize the part of Cardinal Wolsey—sacerdotalism, authority, self-mastery, and later, plaintive grief and manly resignation—were all well within Kemble's range of expression, and he produced a powerful effect in this rôle, which has ever since been a favourite one with all prominent character actors,

<sup>1</sup> He did not, however, himself take the part when he first produced *Henry VIII*.

<sup>2</sup> William Hazlitt (1778-1830), an excellent essayist and critic, whose penetrating judgment of literature and the stage had no small influence and importance.

<sup>3</sup> William Hazlitt: *A View of the English Stage*, p. 284.



15.—Mrs Siddons as Lady Macbeth (p. 34).





whereas before Kemble's time it had been comparatively neglected.

Ludwig Tieck, who saw Kemble as Cardinal Wolsey, no doubt on one of the last occasions on which he played the part, writes of his performance :

"My ear had at last become more accustomed to this extremely deliberate, plaintive style of declamation, and as most of the characters, particularly the King, spoke much more quickly, and as, moreover, this tone of solemnity was much more defensible in the case of the old Cardinal, the general effect produced by the performance was just and satisfactory.

"This evening Kemble showed himself a truly great artist, particularly in the scene after his fall, in which the nobles assembled round him rejoice in his misfortunes, and he, still unbowed and haughty in his sorrow, speaks out his whole mind to them. This figure, majestic in the depths of grief, this heart already broken, but rising once more in all its strength above the malice of his enemies, this trembling voice, regaining, after a hard struggle, its firm manly tones,—all this was incomparably fine and of the utmost completeness and excellence."<sup>1</sup>

It was the so-called 'Roman' parts, however, that were best of all suited to John Kemble's peculiar gifts. Roman, or pseudo-Roman, classicism was coming more and more into fashion in literature, in painting, even in dress and the style of wearing the hair. And about the time when Talma, with youthful ardour and the assurance of genius, was forcing through to victory on the French stage, despite the horror of the old *sociétaires*, his new vision of the pictorial and plastic in dramatic art, John Kemble, a somewhat older man, in his heavier and more deliberate but equally pertinacious fashion, was bringing the same theories to the front in England. The classic style, however, had a longer reign before it, and was of greater permanent importance, in France than in England, the French national genius having more kinship with the Roman spirit, and more inclination to declamatory pathos, than the English, which is more apt to wander in the winding wood-paths of

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Tieck: *Dramaturgische Blätter*, ii. 153 *seq.*



romance than to follow the parallel straight lines of classicism.

Meanwhile the new methods acted in both countries as a reviving force on the classical drama of the eighteenth century, and by their introduction of some approach to correctness in Roman costume, and of statuesque attitude and bearing, aroused a sense of historical colour which had hitherto been completely lacking on the stage, as in pictorial art.

Kemble had all the physical, and many of the mental and spiritual qualities suited to this new style of art. He looked magnificent in a Roman toga, and had all the dignity and force suited to the costume. It is thus with parts like Addison's Cato and Coriolanus that his name and fame are especially connected. He was much admired in particular as Coriolanus, and he himself loved this part above all others. It should be remarked, however, that he did not present unadulterated Shakespeare's drama, through which plays so vigorously the fieriest blood of the Renaissance, but a twice-diluted version, compounded of James Thomson's heroic tragedy of the same name, produced in 1748, and a rehash concocted by Kemble himself and the prompter, Wrighton,<sup>1</sup> and entitled *Coriolanus, or The Roman Matron, a Tragedy altered from Shakespeare and Thomson* (1789).

Thus the Kemble school marched on, borne victoriously forward by Mrs 'Siddons' commanding genius and John Kemble's persevering energy, supported by a Court otherwise uninterested in the stage, and by the world of fashion, and enlisting many recruits, most of them, however, from among the numerous members of the Kemble family itself.

Of these Charles Kemble,<sup>2</sup> a much younger brother, displayed most talent and had the most successful career. He had more lightness of touch than his brother John, to whom he gave efficient support by his playing in the secondary tragic rôles. He was best, however, in high

<sup>1</sup> It is the *Biographia Dramatica* (ii. 129) which lays this crime to the prompter's charge. The hotch-potch was successful, and Kemble chose it for his farewell performance on quitting the stage.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Kemble was born in 1775 and died in 1854; his début at Drury Lane took place 2nd April 1794, and he retired in 1836.



16.—Miss Fanny Kemble as Juliet (p. 39).





comedy parts, his Mercutio and Petruchio especially being much praised. But even better than he was his wife, Maria Theresia de Camp, born in Vienna, of French parents, but brought up in England, at first as a dancer, in which capacity she had the somewhat doubtful honour of attracting the interest of the Prince of Wales, later George IV., who obtained an engagement for her at a 'legitimate' theatre. She applied herself with great energy to mastering the English language, and became in time an exceedingly engaging actress, and even a popular authoress.

This couple again had two daughters, who both went on the stage; one, Adelaide, becoming a singer, while the other, Fanny (Frances) Kemble, rose to fame as a tragic actress.<sup>1</sup>

The brother next to John Philip, Stephen Kemble, was also both himself an actor and married to an actress, Miss Satchell. He by no means resembled his two brothers in respectability and correctness of life and manners, being rather the typical dissolute strolling player. His greatest title to renown as an actor was that he was able to play Falstaff without stuffing.

Two of the sisters, Frances (Fanny)—not to be confused with the niece—and Elizabeth, were also on the stage, the latter being married to an actor and manager, Whitlock, the former to the dramatic critic, Twiss. They were such exceedingly poor actresses that not even Mrs Siddons' and John Kemble's united authority and influence could induce the public to believe in their talent.

To complete the lengthy catalogue of this band of brothers and sisters, brothers- and sisters-in-law and their children, we must add John Kemble's wife (née Hopkins),<sup>2</sup> previously the wife of the mad actor Brereton; and also Mrs Siddons' son.

Surrounded by this family body-guard, and by a faithful troop of adherents both in 'the profession' and among the public, the Kemble school marched forward almost un-

<sup>1</sup> Miss Fanny Kemble afterwards became Mrs Butler, and was known by that name also, both as actress, reciter and authoress.

<sup>2</sup> See above, p. 13.



opposed to power, honour and riches, dominating the theatrical world from the day of Mrs Siddons' first conquest of London, till the hour when, full of years and honour, she finally retired from the stage.

## II

The new Drury Lane under Sheridan—External Conditions—Lighting and Precautions against Fire—The Fire—Sheridan in Parliament—The final Drury Lane.

THE external conditions of the theatre were very greatly modified during the period dealt with in the preceding chapter, and the modifications had important effects on the methods of theatrical art and on theatrical life in general.

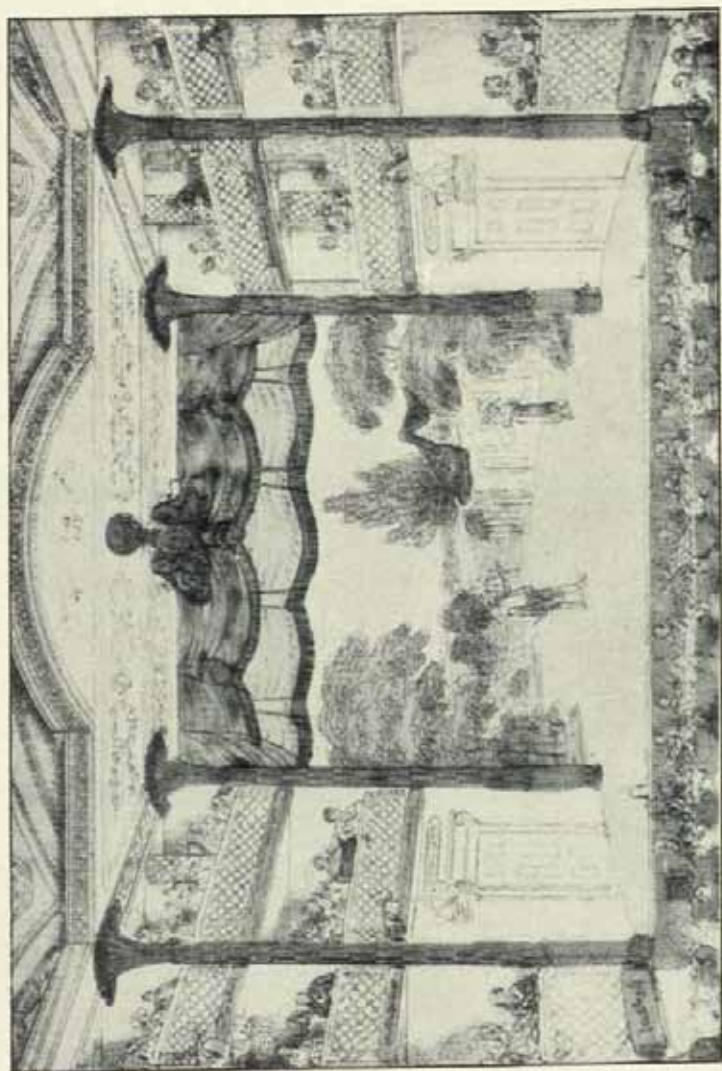
The old Drury Lane of Garrick's day was a very large theatre, in reality too large to suit the spoken drama. It held 2000 spectators, or about 400 more than, for example, the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. Yet as time went on Sheridan began to regard it as rather out of date and inadequate, particularly for the production of the great spectacular pieces and pantomimes, which he had recourse to more and more, alongside of his legitimate artistic productions, partly because he thought such measures necessary in order to attract the public in greater numbers, partly in order to make head against the competition of Covent Garden.

Accordingly in 1791 he pulled down the old playhouse, and three years after, a new, enormous Drury Lane, erected at very great expense, was ready, and he was able to open it on the 12th March 1794.

The new theatre was the second largest in Europe; only the San Carlo in Naples surpassed it, while La Scala in Milan was about the same size. It held 3611 spectators, and even at the comparatively low prices charged, the receipts from a full house were £771.<sup>1</sup> The proscenium opening was 43 feet wide and 38 feet high, the height of the auditorium from floor to ceiling was 56 feet.

The enormous size of the stage had serious disadvantages, to remedy which various measures were resorted

<sup>1</sup> H. Barton Baker: *The London Stage, Its History and Traditions*, i. 97.



17.—A London Theatre (New Haymarket) at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century (p. 41).





to. The present device of an adjustable proscenium, permitting the width of the stage to be reduced or increased according to circumstances, was then unknown. The plan adopted was to utilize for the most important scenes the portion of the stage<sup>1</sup> between the two proscenium walls, which in the English theatre extended a considerable distance backward from the footlights.<sup>2</sup> This was facilitated by the existence of two large doors, one in each proscenium wall, which could be used for entrances and exits. For example, in the third Act of *Hamlet* the Ghost entered by one of these doors and moved across the wide stage obliquely towards the background. By this means there was provided, as it were, a separate rostrum or speaking stage, apart from the space occupied by the actual scene-picture, where the figures of the actors would have been dwarfed and their voices would have been indistinct and inaudible, not only because of the vastness of the theatre, but also because, the art of plastic scenic construction being as yet unknown, the scenery was composed of open canvas wings, borders of painted drapery, and flimsy back-'flats.' Amid all this loose, open canvas scenery the voices of the actors were lost. Accordingly, whenever possible, important scenes of dialogue were thrown forward, between the solid proscenium walls, where the players could be seen and heard, while the back-stage forming the actual picture was used as a rule only for entrances and exits, for crowds, or such scenes as absolutely required the aid of scenery in order to produce their due effect.

The lighting arrangements had now been considerably improved. While in the old Drury Lane Theatre the stage was lighted by six chandeliers, each having twelve candles in brass sockets,<sup>3</sup> and by a row of oil lamps as footlights (an innovation of Garrick's), things had now progressed so far that the sources of illumination were

<sup>1</sup> Known as 'the apron.' (Trans. note.)

<sup>2</sup> This arrangement still exists in certain old or old-fashioned theatres, such as the Copenhagen Royal Theatre. But the doors in the proscenium walls were a specially English feature, which, so far as known, was not imitated elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> See Tate Wilkinson: *Memoirs*, ii. 33. The chandeliers of course hung down amidst the scenery.



everywhere hidden behind the wings and borders, and the only remains of the old system of lighting were a pair of magnificent drop-chandeliers in the proscenium.

With a conservatism which in this instance was most salutary, the constructors of the new theatre forbore to adopt that ugly device, so destructive of illusion, known as the prompter's box, which had been introduced everywhere outside England. In the theatre of Shakespeare's time such an arrangement would of course have been an impossibility, and, as far as can be gathered, it has never in later times been introduced on the English stage. The prompter with his book was—and is—placed in the wings on the right-hand side (with reference to the spectators), which was accordingly called at Drury Lane the P.S. (the prompter's side),<sup>1</sup> while the left-hand side was the O.P. (opposite to the prompter).

As regards the actual stage-setting, it had hitherto been very unusual, except in the case of great productions of spectacular pantomime, to provide new scenery for new plays or productions. The theatres contented themselves with a small collection of stock scenes; one or two rooms, a large hall, a wood, a street, which were used in every production in turn.<sup>2</sup> All this was now changed; special scenery was painted for almost every new piece, and for the first time people began to talk more about the staging of a piece than about the piece itself or the actual performance. So it was in the case of the first performance<sup>3</sup> at the new Drury Lane, when *Macbeth* was produced by John Kemble in a setting which, according to the standard of the time, was of extraordinary magnificence. All the

<sup>1</sup> Similarly in the Copenhagen Royal Theatre, to avoid confusion between right and left, the right (from the spectators) is called D.S. [Ladies' (Dame) Side—the box for the Ladies-in-waiting being on that side], while the other is called K.S. (King's Side—from the Royal Box).

<sup>2</sup> "There is," Tate Wilkinson tells us (*Memoirs*, iv. 91 seq.), "one scene at Covent Garden used from 1747 to this day" (1790) "which has wings and flat, of Spanish figures at full length, and two folding doors in the middle:—I never see those wings slide on but I feel as if seeing my very old acquaintance unexpectedly."

<sup>3</sup> The theatre was opened to the public for the first time, as stated above, on the 12th March 1794. On this occasion a selection from Handel's Oratorios was performed. The first dramatic performance took place on the 21st April.

world was talking of the marvellous banquet-scene, such of them at least as were not too busy discussing the new arrangements for the prevention of fire, which indeed were practically exhibited to the public in very effective fashion.

Before the play began Miss Farren spoke a Prologue, in which she dwelt upon the various excellences of the new playhouse, and declared in particular that in future no outbreak of fire need cause disturbance or anxiety, as there were at command streams of water amply sufficient to extinguish any fire.<sup>1</sup> The curtain then rose and discovered the stage converted into a large lake, on which a man in a boat was rowing about, while into it from the background tumbled a rushing waterfall. An iron curtain then descended and was subjected to a vigorous hammering to prove that it was genuine.

In spite of this confident defiance to the Spirits of Fire, not more than fifteen years had passed before the magnificent theatre was a smoking heap of ruins. It was burnt down on the 24th February 1809, while its Manager was in the House of Commons taking part in a debate on the conduct of the war in Spain.<sup>2</sup> The glare of the fire shone in through the windows of the House, and the speakers were frequently interrupted by the shouts of "Fire" outside. Sheridan had been informed of what was happening, but he remained sitting calmly in his place, and merely whispered across the table to a friend that Drury Lane was burning. Lord Temple then rose and moved that the debate be adjourned, on account of the great misfortune which threatened an Honble. Member of the House. But Sheridan replied that "whatever might be the extent of the individual calamity, he did not consider it of a nature to interrupt their proceedings on so great a national question."<sup>3</sup> On which the debate was continued

<sup>1</sup> "The very ravages of fire we scout,  
For we have wherewithal to put it out;  
In ample reservoirs our firm reliance,  
Where streams set conflagration at defiance."

*Prologue* at the opening of Drury Lane, 21st April 1794. Quoted by Barton Baker: *The London Stage*, i. 98.

<sup>2</sup> Where Wellington was fighting against Napoleon's armies, led by Masséna.

<sup>3</sup> *Parliamentary Debates*, quoted by W. Fraser Rea, *Sheridan*, ii. 175.



till half-past two in the morning, while Sheridan's theatre was burning to the ground.

It proved indeed a great misfortune for Sheridan, inasmuch as the result of the fire was to exclude him for good and all from theatrical management. He could not raise money to rebuild Drury Lane. His conduct of the finances of the theatre had been so notoriously bad, that it was now clear to everyone how impossible it was to entrust him with the management of a great, economically risky, undertaking; and on the artistic side things had not been much better.

As long as Kemble retained the management of the stage a certain level of artistic propriety had been steadily maintained. But John Kemble and Mrs Siddons with their following had left him in 1802. And, left to himself, and driven on by the constant craving for 'successes' that would at least supply funds for his private needs, he had recourse to ever lower and lower forms of entertainment, at last (like the Duke of Weimar, but unlike Goethe), not even disdaining the assistance of four-footed artists in attracting the public to his theatre. Thus in 1803 he produced Reynolds' *Caravan*, in which 'serio-comic romantic drama' a Newfoundland dog played a leading part, and in which the most thrilling situation occurred when the faithful animal, answering to the name of Carlo, leaped into a waterfall of real water—supplied from the fire-engine—and rescued a child, whom the villain, from rage at the child's mother's rejection of his wicked advances, had flung into the water from a cliff. "Never did Garrick or Betterton . . . obtain louder plaudits than this four-footed actor from Newfoundland during a long run of the piece."<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly Sheridan was given no share in the new Drury Lane Theatre, though he made the most strenuous efforts to raise money. It was a brewer named Samuel Whitbread who raised by subscription the immense sum of £400,000, the cost of rebuilding the theatre in its fourth and final form.<sup>2</sup> It was opened on the

<sup>1</sup> *Biographia Dramatica*, ii. 83.

<sup>2</sup> Drury Lane Theatre dates from 1663; it was burnt down only nine years

10th October 1812, under the artistic direction of the dramatist Samuel James Arnold,<sup>1</sup> and Sheridan was forced to retire from the field, a ruined man. The last years of his life were passed in a perpetual struggle with his creditors. But it is clear that his daily life was untouched by actual want, and he certainly had no reason to envy the new managers of his old theatre. Samuel Whitbread, the rich brewer, committed suicide two years later, worn out by the hopeless struggle to make the working of the over-capitalized theatre pay. Though the new theatre was a good deal smaller than the one destroyed by the fire, it was yet found impossible to fill it, even in the first year, which ended with a large deficit. A regular committee of 'noblemen and gentlemen,' who had invested money in the enterprise, took it on themselves to interfere in the ordinary working of the theatre, and naturally, as is always the case with such committees, reduced the management to an indescribable state of confusion and disorder. In short, the state of the new Drury Lane threatened to be even worse than that of the old.

### III

John Kemble's Management of Covent Garden—George Frederick Cooke—  
Drink and Romanticism—Cooke and Kemble.

MEANWHILE John Kemble, after he and his whole family had left Sheridan, had taken over the artistic management of Covent Garden, in which he acquired at the same time a considerable proprietary share.<sup>2</sup> He began his management in the season 1803-4,<sup>3</sup> supported by his sister, Mrs

later (1672), and was rebuilt, and reopened in 1674. This was the theatre pulled down by Sheridan. The existing theatre is the one built by Whitbread, and has undergone no essential modification. Its arrangements, equipment, etc., were imitated from those of the great theatre at Bordeaux, which was then considered one of the handsomest in Europe.

<sup>1</sup> Arnold, who was a son of the well-known musician, Dr Arnold, had previously been manager of the Lyceum, a summer theatre where opera was performed. He was the author of a number of light plays, of which one (*Man and Wife*) was performed at the Danish Royal Theatre in 1821.

<sup>2</sup> The chief proprietor was Thomas Harris, who was likewise financial manager.

<sup>3</sup> In the intermediate year—between leaving Drury Lane and taking over



Siddons, and his brother Charles, and immediately gave a new direction to the activities of the theatre. No less than eleven of Shakespeare's best plays were produced in this first season, besides several modern plays of the emotional sort then so popular, such as Kotzebue's *Pizarro* and *Menschenhasz und Reue* (called in England *The Stranger*), the colossal success of which is as incomprehensible to us as the 'world-successes' of the present day will doubtless be a hundred years hence.

His management seems on the whole to have been both prudent and energetic, and Covent Garden in the years that followed became incontestably the leading theatre. Though he and his sister were naturally the most prominent members of the company, he yet found room for the artists who had belonged to the theatre before he joined it, and even made over some of his principal parts to them when they seemed to him to fit them.

Among the forces he found at his disposal special mention should be made of George Frederick Cooke. He and John Philip Kemble were as opposite as fire and water. Though belonging to the same generation,<sup>1</sup> they differed as completely in every respect, in their views of their art, in life and conduct, as if they represented two different periods, as indeed, in the inner and spiritual sense, they actually did.

As Henderson was the last of Garrick's school, so Cooke must be regarded as the precursor of Kean.

With Cooke there appears on the stage for the first time the strain of wildness, nay almost of madness, which is the mark of romanticism in theatrical art; a wildness in many cases inflamed by unbridled indulgence in strong drink—not the ordinary convivial tippling which has been usual with a certain class of comic actors and has brought forth many alcohol-inspired drolleries, but a shattering,

Covent Garden—John Kemble made an extensive tour abroad, through France and Spain. He was much fêted, in Paris particularly by his great fellow-artist Talma, though his journey was not the triumphal progress that Garrick's in his time had been.

<sup>1</sup> They were within a year of the same age. Cooke was born in 1756, Kemble the year after. But while Cooke died in 1811, Kemble lived on till 1826.



18.—Covent Garden Theatre about 1770.



19.—Cooke as Richard III.





reckless use of stimulants, often driving its victim to the verge of madness, while raising him at moments to dizzy heights of imaginative creation.

It was a hard-drinking time all round, especially in England. Authors, men of science, learned jurists, statesmen, artists, clergymen and princely personages, each and all consumed many bottles of wine daily; William Pitt would often put away his four bottles of heady port before going down to the House of Commons to make one of the finished, masterly speeches for which he was famous; it was an unknown thing for Sheridan to be sober when he came down to the theatre in the evening; even the correct and dignified John Kemble had a great liking for a good drinking bout. But this vigorous, systematic consumption of great quantities of good wine was not to be looked on as anything in the nature of debauchery. It was a good old custom, to which it behoved a gentleman to conform, and which indeed does not seem to have injured either the health or the power of work of the strong-constituted gentlemen who conformed to it.

The drinking indulged in by the Romantics, on the other hand, was of a quite different sort. They drank, just as in some cases they smoked opium or chewed hashish, to intoxicate themselves, to deaden the pains of life, to escape from reality into a fantastic dreamland.

It was in this fashion that Cooke, and Kean after him, drank. In one of his diaries Cooke writes about himself: "To use a strange expression, I am sometimes in a kind of mental intoxication; some, I believe, would call it insanity. I believe it is allied to it. I then can imagine myself in strange situations and strange places. This humour, whatever it is, comes uninvited, but it is nevertheless easily dispelled,—at least, generally so. When it *cannot* be dispelled, it must, of course, become madness."

Cooke never became the man his powers should have made him. He was well on in life—forty-four years old—when, after a long, agitated career in the provinces, he obtained a permanent engagement in London, and by this time he was already so deeply sunk in habitual drunkenness that he was an extremely precarious support



for his theatre. He would sometimes appear at a performance—even a first performance—so drunk that he could neither speak, stand, nor walk. Sometimes he would suddenly and utterly vanish from the visible world for a considerable time, and would then as suddenly reappear from his subterranean haunts with a frank confession and apology to the public, who would always forgive him.

The fact was that, in spite of these fatal weaknesses, he was capable, for brief moments, of striking out such powerful and passionate flashes of art, of presenting such glimpses into a wild, distracted human soul, that the current correct, solemnly classic style of acting paled, and seemed flaccid and chilly, in comparison. "He did not play many parts well," it has been said,<sup>1</sup> "but those he did play well he played better than anyone else. But dissipation marred his vast powers even in these."

In 1800, when Cooke appeared at Covent Garden in Richard III., John Philip Kemble was playing the same part at Drury Lane, and there arose between the two a contest similar to that between Quin and Garrick<sup>2</sup> in an earlier generation. Here again the artist of genius, in league with nature, won a victory over the polished, artificial declaimer. Unlike Garrick, however, Cooke was incapable, for lack of continuity of talent, of maintaining and confirming his victory. His genius was like a blazing fire of straw, dying down as quickly as it flared up; it could not hold its own in the long run against John Kemble's steady, calmly-burning waxen taper.

Naturally enough, Cooke felt a hearty hatred for Kemble, though he was artist enough to admit that Kemble's restrained and impressive art was superior to his own in many characters. Thus when Kemble took over the management of Covent Garden it was a severe blow to Cooke, who expected the worst from his rival. In this respect, however, he found himself mistaken. Kemble treated him well and even generously, letting him play the parts he had made his own and retain the

<sup>1</sup> Dr Doran's *Annals of the English Stage*, ed. R. W. Lowe, iii. 230.

<sup>2</sup> See vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), pp. 381-3 and 391-4.

position in the company to which he was entitled. But it was impossible that there should be any real sympathy between them. Cooke saw only treacherous cunning in Kemble's considerate treatment of him, and was in the habit, when drunk, of abusing 'Black Jack,' as he called him, like a pickpocket. What probably irritated Kemble even more was that Cooke, when they were playing together—as, for example, in *Othello*<sup>1</sup>—was given to upsetting his pedantically pondered, prearranged 'business' by sudden and brilliant extempore strokes, which annoyed and embarrassed Kemble as much as they enraptured the audience.

An association of this kind could not, in the nature of things, last very long. After a career, frequently interrupted, of less than ten years in London, Cooke went to America, where at first he made an immense success,<sup>2</sup> and seemed in a fair way to win renown and riches as the leading actor in the country. But his ungovernable passion for drink, combined with his immense contempt for 'the Yankees,' a contempt he took no pains to conceal, and which sometimes found the most fantastic expression, ruined these prospects, and he died in poverty and wretchedness only two years later (1812). In his last years he composed a series of moral and religious 'thoughts,' specially directed against the vice of drunkenness.

Cooke's disappearance marked the suppression of the first attempts of Romanticism, as yet unconscious of its powers, to revolt against the ruling Classical school. Edmund Kean, the victorious hero of the Romantic movement, whose fate resembled Cooke's in many ways, had evidently a deep feeling of kinship with his unfortunate forerunner. During his tour in America in 1821, when Cooke was already forgotten, Kean erected a handsome monument to his memory in St Paul's Church, New York.

<sup>1</sup> Kemble played *Othello*; Cooke, *Iago*.

<sup>2</sup> He first appeared in New York, 2nd November 1810.



## IV

The Art of Mrs Siddons—The new Covent Garden—The 'O.P.' Riots—  
Last years of Mrs Siddons and John Kemble.

MRS SIDDONS was forty-eight years old when, along with her brother, she left Drury Lane and went over to Covent Garden Theatre. She was thus past the age when an actress is at her best, and the most important part of her artistic career lay behind her. None the less she was still, beyond dispute, the first tragic actress in England, and any theatre of whose company she was for the time a member became, in virtue of her name and of her noble art, the leading theatre of the day. The English stage has never been remarkably rich in great tragic actresses, and Mrs Siddons in her time had no rivals<sup>1</sup> worth mentioning in tragedy and serious drama. She appeared therefore to her contemporaries, as she still appears in history, as the complete, the ideal embodiment of tragic art, and it was not without reason that Joshua Reynolds, doubtless with deliberate intention, represented her, in his famous picture, as the Tragic Muse, or that in these latter days a monument has been erected to her in London,<sup>2</sup> probably the first and hitherto the only statue of an actress that has ever been erected in a public place.

The effect produced by her on the public and on her fellow-actors was of the immediate and irresistible kind that can only be created by a strongly-marked and vigorous personality. While there were marked differences of opinion about Kemble's art, which found at least as many opponents as adherents, the wonderful power which invested, like an atmosphere, every appearance of Sarah Siddons on the stage, was uncontested and incontestable, though she was of course exposed, no less than others, to malicious

<sup>1</sup> Mrs Crawford (1734-1801) would, however, have been such a rival had she not been in her decline when Mrs Siddons, a much younger woman, was at the height of her powers. Mrs Crawford was an able actress in the old, pre-classic style. She was thrice married, first to the actor Dancer, next to the famous Barry, Garrick's rival, and lastly to Crawford, a man much younger than herself.

<sup>2</sup> In Paddington, where she died.

and envious criticisms by colleagues and professional critics.

To the powerful effect produced by the mere appearance on the stage of this remarkable personality, a younger fellow-artist, George Bartley,<sup>1</sup> gives very vivid testimony. When quite a young man he acted with Mrs Siddons in a very tedious tragedy by Dr Thomas Franklin, entitled *The Earl of Warwick*, in which she appeared as Margaret of Anjou, while Bartley played the youthful Edward IV. The situation in the scene described by him is as follows:

The Earl of Warwick has taken prisoner Margaret of Anjou and her son, and King Edward is expecting Warwick to appear before him and recount his triumph. But, in place of Warwick, Margaret of Anjou appears, having succeeded in surprising and killing the Earl, just as he was bending in triumph over her son. Neither King Edward nor the audience knows that this has happened. Bartley goes on to describe the scene thus:

"The scene had a large archway, in the centre, at the back of the stage. She (Mrs Siddons) was preceded by four guards, who advanced rapidly through the archway, and divided, two and two on each side, leaving the opening quite clear. Instantly, on their separating, the giantess burst upon the view, and stood in the centre of the arch motionless. So electrifying was the unexpected impression, that I stood for a moment breathless. But the effect extended beyond me; the audience had full participation of its power; and the continued applauses that followed gave me time to recover and speculate upon the manner in which such an extraordinary effect had been made. I could not but gaze upon her attentively. Her head was erect, and the fire of her brilliant eyes darted directly upon mine. Her wrists were bound with chains, which hung suspended from her arms, that were dropped loosely

<sup>1</sup> G. W. Bartley (1782(?)–1858), son of the box-keeper of the Bath Theatre, began his career in the 'juvenile lead,' playing Orlando on the occasion of his debut at Drury Lane (1802), but later went over to the line of comic old men, etc., in which he made his chief successes. He was stage-manager at Covent Garden from 1829 for a number of years, and did not retire till 1852. He states that the performance he describes took place in 1809 or 1810. Mrs Siddons was thus fifty-four or fifty-five years old. (Trans. note.)



on each side; nor had she, on her entrance, used any action beyond her *rapid walk* and *sudden stop*, within the extensive archway, which she really *seemed to fill*. This, with the flashing eye, and fine smile of appalling triumph which overspread her magnificent features, constituted all the effort which usually produced an effect upon actors and audience never surpassed, if ever equalled."

Practically all witnesses are in agreement as to the immediate, thrilling effect which Mrs Siddons, by the dramatic power of her personality, was able to produce by her mere appearance on the stage. Washington Irving, for example, who saw the famous actress when he was a young man fresh from America, uninfluenced by preconceived enthusiasm or traditional piety, writes about her thus:

"Were I to indulge without reserve in my praises of Mrs Siddons, I am afraid you would think them hyperbolic. What a wonderful woman! The very first time I saw her perform I was struck with admiration. It was in the part of Calista.<sup>1</sup> Her looks, her voice, her gestures, delighted me. She penetrated in a moment to my heart. She froze and melted it by turns; a glance of her eye, a start, an exclamation, thrilled through my whole frame. The more I see her, the more I admire her. I hardly breathe while she is on the stage. She works up my feelings till I am like a mere child. And yet this woman is old, and has lost all elegance of figure: think then what must be her powers, that she can delight and astonish even in the characters of Calista and Belvidera.<sup>2</sup>

"In person Mrs Siddons is not unlike her sister Mrs Whitlock,<sup>3</sup> for she has latterly outgrown in size the limits even of *embonpoint*. I even think there is some similarity in their countenances, though that of Mrs Siddons is infinitely superior. It is in fact the very index of her mind,

<sup>1</sup> In N. Rowe's tragedy, *The Fair Penitent* (1703), one of the most popular of the older tragedies. It went the rounds of the European theatres in a variety of adaptations.

<sup>2</sup> In Thos. Otway's *Venice Preserved*. Both these parts are those of young heroines.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Kemble, who had gone to America with her husband, the theatrical manager Whitlock. Irving had seen her in America. She afterwards returned to London, where she appeared at Drury Lane, but without success.



20.—Mrs Jordan (p. 53).

*(From the painting by Sir T. Lawrence.)*





and in its mutable transitions may be read those nice gradations of passion that language is inadequate to express.

"In dignity and grace she is no way inferior to Kemble, and they never appear to better advantage than when acting together.

"What Mrs Siddons may have been when she had the advantages of youth and form, I cannot say ; but it appears to me that her performance at present leaves room to wish for nothing more. Age has planted no visible wrinkles on her brow, and it is only by the practice and experience of years that she has been enabled to attain her present consummate excellence."

Mrs Siddons, of course, played all the important female characters, as well as a number of unimportant ones, in the English tragic repertory of the time. But she did not confine herself to these. She was not afraid to undertake gay, lively characters, like Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*, and even seems to have felt a certain preference for such parts, a preference by no means shared by her audiences. While in tragedy she had no competitors whom she could not crush and extinguish with the greatest ease—as she extinguished Mrs Crawford, who before her appearance had been so much admired—the weight of her style, her seriousness, her lofty beauty, all hindered rather than helped her in lighter passages. Even the young heroine-lovers' parts were not particularly well suited to her temperament, so insensible to erotic feeling ; and in these, as in gay and lively rôles, she had to yield the palm to actresses in other respects by no means her superiors, such as the beautiful, elegant Miss Farren and the petite and joyous Mrs Jordan.<sup>1</sup> In her

<sup>1</sup> Jordan was not this charming actress's real name, but a nickname given in jest, by Tate Wilkinson, the strolling manager, to the youthful Dorothy Bland, when she joined his company after crossing the water from Ireland for the first time, as the Jews crossed the river Jordan. She was the natural daughter of an actress, Miss Phillips ; the father being a Captain Bland. After playing in the provinces she was engaged, when in her twenty-fourth year (she was born in 1762), as a sort of understudy to Mrs Siddons at Drury Lane. In the serious drama, however, she never made any mark, whereas in comedy she soon acquired extraordinary popularity. Less elegant than Miss Farren, but plumper and fully as attractive, she became the acknowledged darling of the public in the roguish young girls' and merry soubrette parts, which were outside Mrs Siddons' line. Apart from her charming talent as an actress she



somewhat uniform repertory Lady Macbeth and Queen Katherine always shone out as the summits of her achievement, amid the tear-compelling heroines' parts, only raised into importance by her genius, such as Isabella in Southern's tragedy, Mrs Beverley in Edward Moore's *Gambler*, Belvidera in Otway's *Venice Preserved*, and Calista.

Mrs Siddons' private life was an uneventful one, undisturbed by emotional or economic vicissitudes. In this respect, too, she was a great contrast to her predecessors and contemporaries in the theatre. Since the days of Charles II. and the merry Nell Gwynn, the reigning London actresses had usually been of the race of glorified courtesans, leading a life of varied amorous adventure, setting the standard of fashion and elegance, mistresses of political salons frequented by the first men of the time, dissipating princely fortunes, and sometimes, when their physical charms had vanished, and the fortunes with them, ending their lives in a debtor's prison or the poorhouse—unless they had gained the lifelong protection of some great man by a more or less morganatic marriage. Such were the careers of Miss Bellamy, Mrs Abington, Mrs Robinson—the youthful Prince of Wales's beautiful 'Perdita'—such, though of a less ignoble cast, were those of Miss Farren and Mrs Jordan.

Sarah Siddons, on the contrary, lived in peaceful domesticity with her handsome, insignificant husband, amassed methodically by her work as an artist a considerable fortune, was a favourite at Court, where she appeared, not as the declared mistress of a Royal Prince, but as a reader to virtuous princesses, was sought by the greatest of the land, not for her physical attractions but for her intellect, and was subject to no breath of suspicion, except perhaps among the great playgoing public, who took no delight in all this righteousness, thinking that a great actress ought to have her lover, just as a great actor ought to be fond of the bottle.

is noted for her *quasi*-matrimonial connection with the Duke of Clarence, afterwards King William IV., a connection which lasted twenty years and in which she conducted herself with much delicacy. To her great grief he finally broke it off, for political reasons.



Levity and extravagance, however, were not Mrs Siddons' affair. On the side of the passions she was throughout unassailable; and even in her youth her prudence in money-matters was excessive. At thirty years old she writes with great satisfaction to her friend, Mr Whalley: "I have at last, my dear friend, attained the *ten thousand pounds* which I set my heart upon; and am now perfectly at ease with respect to fortune. I thank God, who has enabled me to procure myself so comfortable an income." This sum, a very considerable one in that day, she had saved from her earnings after barely four years' work on the London stage. She did not stop at this point, however, but left at her death, when she had been nineteen years in retirement, about four times as much. And this was by no means an excessive fortune, in view of the very high salaries she demanded and obtained. Her savings had been considerably reduced by more than one economic misfortune, such as, in particular, Sheridan's bankruptcy, and later, the burning of Covent Garden Theatre. The latter misfortune, which occurred in 1808—on the 30th September, or about five months before Drury Lane was burnt—was no doubt an even harder blow to her brother, John Kemble, who was one of the proprietors, but Mrs Siddons' loss, too, was considerable.

Covent Garden Theatre, during the first five years of John Kemble's management, had made great progress both artistically and from the business point of view. Against strokes of business adroitness, such as the engagement of the infant phenomenon Master Betty, (a boy who for a time aroused wild enthusiasm by his playing in tragic rôles), and the production of numerous spectacular pantomimes, might fairly be set the studious care with which the legitimate repertory was maintained on the boards. It was thus a very heavy blow when the theatre, just as it had established itself in the favour of the best class of playgoers, was destroyed by this terrible fire.

It is true that Kemble found no serious difficulty in raising capital for the erection of a new theatre. His and his sister's numerous rich and aristocratic admirers placed great sums at his disposal, and a new playhouse rose, with



surprising rapidity, from the ashes of the old.<sup>1</sup> But the new theatre was soon experiencing the same difficulties as Drury Lane; it was too large, too magnificent and too costly; the artistic effort was eternally at odds with the necessities of the struggle for economic existence.

The difficulties began at once. To meet the expenses, which for the period were enormous, the prices had been somewhat increased—the box tier seats from six to seven shillings, the pit from three and six to four shillings—and this insignificant enhancement gave enormous offence and occasioned disturbances of unexampled violence, which now, a hundred years after, strike us as merely ludicrous, but which at the time were exceedingly serious for those interested in the theatre, and indeed came very near to being regular mob-riots.

The disturbances began at the opening performance, the moment John Kemble entered to speak the prologue. Every seat in the house had been taken at the new prices, but the audience was determined not to give any of the performers a hearing, and their exasperation and resentment were specially directed against John Kemble. The moment he tried to open his mouth a deafening, infernal hubbub arose—hisses, whistles, groans and cat-calls,—while through this Babel of strange primitive sounds resounded the steady rhythmic refrain: "Old Prices—Old Prices." So it went on all through the evening; *Macbeth* was played as a pantomime, since no one either would or could hear a word of what the players said, and the Riot Act was read from the stage, without producing the least effect.

For sixty-one nights in succession these disturbances were kept up. They grew more and more regularly organized, and came to be the favourite pastime of the town, in spite of numerous arrests and of the thrashings administered to individual rioters by hired prize-fighters. People came down with rattles, post-horns and bells to

<sup>1</sup> The old theatre was burnt down 30th September 1808, and the new one, the foundation-stone of which had been laid with great pomp on 30th December 1808 by the Prince of Wales, was opened 18th September 1809. The magnificent new theatre was again burnt down, 4th March 1856, on which the present large Opera House took its place.



drown the players' voices; banners were displayed with the letters O.P. for their device; men had O.P. letters sewn on to their hats and waistcoats; ladies wore O.P. medals; and a special 'O.P. dance' was invented, and was performed by the whole audience.

It is thus described by an eye-witness<sup>1</sup>:

"When the performers entered they were greeted with applause, to indicate that what would follow was not meant personally to them; but the instant they attempted to speak, 'Off! off!', overpowering hisses, appalling hoots, and the 'O.P. dance' commenced, in which the whole audience joined. The dance was performed with deliberate and ludicrous gravity, each person pronouncing the letters 'O.P.' as loud as he could, and accompanying the pronunciation of each with a beat, or blow on the floor or seat beneath him with his feet, a stick or a bludgeon, and as the numerous performers kept in strict time and unison with each other, it was one of the most whimsically tantalizing banters or torments that could be conceived."

For close on three months<sup>2</sup> John Kemble, on whom the whole burden fell—his co-manager, Thomas Harris, being old and infirm—held out with great external calmness, but not without internal qualms, against these furious and stupid attacks. He tried by every means in his power to show the people how unreasonable they were, but all in vain. He was at last forced to give way—on the sixty-first night he came forward with a quasi-apology, and a promise to revert to the old prices. An enormous placard bearing the words: 'We are satisfied' was shoved high into the air from the pit, and with this ridiculous ceremony the equally ridiculous contest, which for a quarter of a year had set all London by the ears, came to an end.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Dibdin, who for many years was pantomime- and occasional-play-writer-in-ordinary to Covent Garden Theatre. Among other pieces he "had the honour," he tells us in his *Reminiscences*, "of producing the first new piece ever acted, but never heard: it might have been as good as Shakespeare's or as bad as the worst of my own, for anything the audience knew, but O.P. and nothing but O.P. was to be listened to, and therefore the success or failure of my piece . . . remains completely undecided." Th. Dibdin: *Reminiscences*, i. 193.

<sup>2</sup> The disturbances continued for just sixty-one performances; but there were of course a number of off nights. They terminated the 15th December 1809.



This was not the first, nor the last, time that a body of theatre-goers have forgotten that their purchase of seats merely gives them the rights of spectators, and that, while judgments expressed by them on the entertainment presented on the stage are relevant and legitimate, they have no right whatever to interfere with the private affairs of the management or the actors. The fault, however, originally lay with the managers and the actors themselves. From being 'His Majesty's Servants' they had become 'the servants of the public,' and this servile attitude had been so often and so emphatically insisted on by them, as to develop the mob-instinct latent in the public into a sort of megalomania. The liberties which an audience of the time was capable of taking with a theatrical manager, and even with its own favourite actors and actresses, often merely to show its power, or from sheer caprice, sound almost incredible at the present day. Innumerable cases are on record in which a manager has been forced, by threats and uproar, to appear upon the stage and apologize for some imaginary or quite trivial offence against the sovereignty of the public; in which the stage has been stormed and sacked by furious, half-drunken spectators; in which the audience has prevented the performance of the play announced for presentation and has demanded and obtained the substitution of another; in which actors or actresses have been fetched from their homes and compelled to appear upon the stage and beg humbly for the theatre-mob's forgiveness.

John Kemble, indeed, was by nature the very reverse of servile. His conduct and bearing were in keeping with his imposing outward appearance; towards the public, as to individuals, they were commanding, calmly superior, a trifle haughty. And he had more than once proved capable of taming the rowdy elements in the theatrical public by his dignified decision and his command of words to fit the occasion.

During a performance of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, for example (1806), while he and his sister were on the stage, someone in the gallery threw an apple at Mrs Siddons' head. John Kemble stepped forward, in the midst of

the general noise and confusion, and said: "Ladies and Gentlemen,—I have been many years acquainted with the benevolence and liberality of a London audience, but we cannot proceed this evening with the performance unless we are protected, especially when ladies are thus exposed to insult." A voice was now heard from the gallery, shouting: "We can't hear you." Kemble then proceeded with great heat: "I will raise my voice, and the galleries *shall* hear me.—This protection is what the audience owe it to themselves to grant; what the performers, for the credit of their profession, have a *right* to demand, and what I will venture so far to assert, that, on the part of the proprietors, I have offered one hundred guineas to any man who will disclose the ruffian who has been guilty of this act." Here there were loud murmurs and much noise among the audience, but Kemble went on calmly: "I throw myself, ladies and gentlemen, upon the high sense of breeding that distinguishes a London audience, and I hope I shall never be wanting in my duty to the public; but nothing shall induce me to suffer insult." With these words he left the stage amidst loud applause from the audience, and the play proceeded without further interruption.

It would appear as if the outrageous display of mob-violence in these too-famous 'O.P. riots' had satiated the appetite of the London theatrical public, or perhaps made them a little ashamed of such abuse of their strength. At any rate from this time forward their lust of power seems to diminish, interference of this scandalous kind with the administrative measures of managers, or the private affairs of performers, becomes more and more rare, and nowadays a point has been reached at which it would be difficult to find anywhere theatrical audiences more easily pleased, amiable, and well-mannered, and at the same time more lively and alert, than the London public.

In reality, despite occasional spurts of animosity on the part of the baser sort of theatre-goers, or in the columns of the gutter-press, which flourished greatly in those days, London was exceedingly proud of the stately sister and brother, Sarah Siddons and John Kemble, and they ended their theatrical career amidst enthusiastic demonstrations in



their honour, showered on them by the same public which not long since had abused and insulted them, and with a pomp eminently suitable to the style of their art and to their personal tastes.

Mrs Siddons was the one who tired first. She aged early, principally by reason of her increasing corpulence, which after she was fifty became so marked as to interfere greatly with her movements. In her fifty-seventh year, on the 29th June 1812, she bade farewell to the stage, in the character of Lady Macbeth. The occasion was of course marked by great enthusiasm, among other manifestations of which was the demand by the audience, after the sleep-walking scene, that the play should cease then and there. She appeared indeed again at rare intervals, at performances for the benefit of one or other of her numerous relations, but not much to her own satisfaction. Her life as an artist she considered at an end. She lived for many years more, however, a calm and dignified life of honoured privacy,<sup>1</sup> surrounded by a large circle of attached friends, and died, 8th June 1831, when seventy-six years of age.

John Kemble remained longer on the stage, but quitted life earlier. His management of the immense new theatre at Covent Garden shaped itself into a hard struggle for his own and his co-proprietor's economic existence, a struggle which drove him, perhaps unavoidably, to the adoption of none too fastidious methods of attracting the public, and in which the interests of art were lamentably sacrificed. For a series of years Covent Garden was little more than a sort of circus, where spectacular pantomime, or troupes of acrobats, horses, elephants, wild beasts, and clowns, were the usual attractions, while serious drama and high comedy only ventured now and then to invite the attention of the public.

In spite of this decadence, of which the whole blame

<sup>1</sup> Tragic solemnity had become a second nature to her, and even in the most everyday matters of ordinary life she was unable to throw it off. Her tall, commanding figure attracted attention wherever she went about the streets in London, and there are many ludicrous anecdotes of her solemn and stately bearing in shops, in restaurants or at dinner parties; as when, having bought a piece of stuff from a shopkeeper, she appalled him by fastening her large dark eyes upon him and asking, in a deep, tragic voice, "*Will it wash?*"; or when she addressed a young waiter in involuntary blank-verse: "I asked for porter, boy; you've brought me beer."



cannot be laid on the public, which has to be guided in such matters, but part at least must be assigned to Kemble, who should have guided it—in spite of all this, it was a melancholy day when the great John Philip, the distinguished John Philip, the stately John Philip, stood for the last time on the boards of a theatre and bade farewell to the fickle-minded public.

The same public which a few years before had insulted him, lampooned him, hooted and howled at him for months together like a pack of wild beasts, acclaimed him at his retirement as a national hero, and wept as at a public calamity. Ludwig Tieck, who was then in London and was present at Kemble's farewell,<sup>1</sup> gives in one of his letters from England a lively picture of the proceedings, showing the lengths to which the sympathy of the theatrical audiences of the day could carry them. "The loudest applause," he writes, "which I had ever heard, even in Italy, was a weak murmur beside the indescribable fury of noise which, on the fall of the curtain, arose on every side, from above, from below, the whole audience shouting, clapping, hammering and tramping, working desperately with hands and feet. The theatre was tightly packed with thousands of people, and the great, spacious, high-domed building seemed transformed into a single enormous machine thundering out a preternatural fury of applause, as men and women shouted, clapped, beat for dear life on the woodwork with fans and sticks, at the same time tramping continuously with their feet. After this incredible din had lasted a long time, Kemble again appeared, deeply moved and dissolved in tears. What had seemed absolutely impossible then occurred: the din swelled yet louder, becoming a thundering uproar, at once terrible and sublime.

"Kemble bowed, and tried several times in vain to speak his few words of farewell; at last with a struggle he attained composure, but his utterance was often broken by tears. Not a sound in the house, except here and there a low, stifled sob. But as soon as he had done, the storm broke out again in all its might."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 23rd June 1817. Kemble appeared at this last performance as Coriolanus.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Tieck: *Dramaturgische Blätter*, ii. 166 seq.



After this farewell ovation, which was followed by a formal and very magnificent farewell dinner, at which, among many other famous persons, his great French colleague Talma was present, Kemble left England to travel in Southern Europe—France, Switzerland, and Italy. He was not an old man—only sixty years of age—but his health, originally strong, had been undermined by overwork in his double capacity of manager and actor. He did not enjoy his well-earned leisure for many years. After a long period of ill-health he died at Lausanne on the 20th February 1823.

Mrs Siddons and John Philip Kemble were the true founders and the most distinguished and imposing representatives of the Classic School in England. The School never attained greater heights than those to which the brother and sister carried it, but it did not die with them. Mrs Siddons found a beautiful and gifted successor in Miss O'Neill, and later in her own niece, Miss Fanny Kemble; and, in Charles Young,<sup>1</sup> John Kemble had a worthy disciple, who preached and practised his doctrine with faith and enthusiasm.

But before the old prophet of classicism had yet finished his course, the new Messiah had appeared, he that was to shake men's faith in the elder gods and break in sunder the tables of the ancient law, Edmund Kean, the Romantic.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Mayne Young (1777-1836) was a cultured and capable actor, and a zealous adherent of the Kemble School. He made his debut in London in 1807, and retired from the stage in 1832.



21.—Miss E. O'Neill (p. 62).

*[From the painting by J. J. Manquerier.]*





## EDMUND KEAN

### I

Legends about Kean's Origin—His Mother and old Mosès Kean—Kean's Artistic Education—His Flight and Life as a Stroller—His Wife, and his Friend, Sheridan Knowles—Kean as Rope-dancer and Chimpanzee.

EDMUND KEAN leaped on to the English stage like Romance personified, and like a little David he straightway smote the mighty Goliath of Classicism in the forehead. Unknown, appearing from a mysterious darkness, a starving, wandering merry-andrew, a pathetic masculine Mignon, performing his tricks in village taverns and market-places, he suddenly stood on the stage of Drury Lane, with none but himself for friend, with no other support than his faith in his own powers, with no other guide than the pillar of fire of his genius. The next morning his fame as an actor was established throughout London, and before a year was out his name was known the world over to all lovers of the theatre. The man himself was a fêted, spoiled hero; money flowed in upon him almost as fast as even he could spend it again in his eccentric caprices; like an enchanted prince, he could reward the good who had shown him friendship in the days of his abasement, and punish the wicked who had thrust the poor juggler away from them.

There was an atmosphere of mystery and romance even about his birth and early childhood, an atmosphere partly due to distance, but much intensified by the fantastic and contradictory stories with which Kean in later years was fond of mystifying his associates.

One of these stories of Kean's, as taken down by one of his listeners,<sup>1</sup> runs as follows:—

"I was born in the year 1787, and if anybody asks you

<sup>1</sup> See Dr Doran's *Their Majesties' Servants*, iii. 360, n. 2.



who was my mother, say Miss Tidswell, the actress ; my father was the late Duke of Norfolk, whom they called *Jockey*.<sup>1</sup> I am not the son of Moses Kean, the mimic, nor of his brother, as some people are pleased to assert, though I bear the same name. I had the honour of being brought up at Arundel Castle till I was seven years old, and there they sometimes, I do not know why, called me Duncan ! After I quitted Arundel Castle, I was soon put upon the stage by my mother. . . . I was at Arundel Castle a few years ago, and, as I showed to the people who had charge of it, I knew every room, passage, winding and turning in it. In one of the large apartments hung a portrait of the old Duke of Norfolk, and the man who was with me said : ' You are very like the old Duke, Sir.' And well he might. I am his son ! "

In this account, which is so detailed and circumstantial as to produce a convincing effect of truth, there is in fact only one true statement—that concerning the year of his birth. All the rest is sheer invention. But the truth about his birth and up-bringing is fully as romantic as the romances improvised by Kean for the benefit of his eagerly receptive friends.

There is no longer any doubt as to who Edmund Kean's mother was. He was the son, not of Miss Tidswell, the actress, but of a certain Ann Carey,<sup>2</sup> who was also an actress of a sort, but of the very lowest sort, and who eked out her living by hawking powder, perfumery, and other articles of the toilet round the streets and alleys. Who his father was is less certain, possibly because Ann Carey herself was not quite clear on the point. She was not married, and belonged to the loosest tribe of votaries of the stage and the street. The general opinion is, however, that the father was either an

<sup>1</sup> Kean must here be speaking of Charles Howard, 11th Duke of Norfolk, who died in 1815. Kean christened his eldest son Howard, presumably with reference to this romantic tale.

<sup>2</sup> Kean might, however, without having recourse to inventive fantasy, have traced his descent through his mother to an aristocratic source, since Ann Carey's grandfather, Henry Carey, musician and author—author of the English national anthem among other things—was the illegitimate son of the Marquis of Halifax, George Saville. Her father, George Saville Carey, was an actor and author of exceedingly inferior calibre.

artisan named Aaron Kean<sup>1</sup>—a tailor or carpenter, doubtless attached to the theatre in one or both of these capacities—or his brother Moses Kean, a ventriloquist well-known in the humbler stage circles.

So much, at least, is certain, that the little Edmund Carey—he did not assume the name of Kean till long after he was grown-up—first saw the light in a wretched room in a London slum on the 4th November 1787. His mother, evidently a thoroughly depraved woman, deserted him when he was three months old, and he was looked after partly by the actress previously mentioned, Miss Tidswell, and in part by complete strangers, who, it is said, found the child starving and half-frozen on a doorstep. The accounts of his early childhood, however, are so confused and untrustworthy, that we can hardly be said to know anything about it, except, what is clear enough, that he was tossed hither and thither, a little, wretched, ragged plaything of Fate, picked up now by one, now by another of the strollers connected with him—his mother, the wandering 'artiste' and street-hawker, Miss Tidswell, also a strolling actress, and his uncle or father, Moses Kean the ventriloquist.

Of these guardians of his childhood it was doubtless Moses Kean whose influence on him was most important, and who set his feet on the paths he was to follow. This Moses Kean, from the little we can ascertain about him, seems to have been a highly original, even a fantastic, personage, like a character in a tale of Hoffman or of Dickens. He was a large, heavy man, with bushy coal-black hair and a wooden leg. His usual costume was a scarlet tail-coat, white satin waistcoat, black satin knee-breeches, and light blue silk stockings; with a three-cornered cocked hat, shoes with large buckles, and a long stick. His profession, as we have said, was that of ventriloquist and 'mimic,' that is to say, he practised the very popular art of imitating the appearance, mannerisms and speech of well-known persons. In this line of business

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes referred to as Edmund Kean; among others by his famous son's first biographer Bryan Walter Procter (Barry Cornwall). See *Life of Edmund Kean*, i. 5.



he was very popular with the great public, and gave his 'Evening Entertainments' all over England, and even in Paris. But his passion was for dramatic art in the grand style, from which he himself was debarred; it was his dream to play King Lear—but how could one play Lear with a wooden leg?

While, then, he was initiating his little nephew into some of the mysteries of the humbler branches of art, he taught him at the same time to know and prize his Shakespeare. He made the boy study and rehearse the most famous Shakespearean rôles, Hamlet for instance, he himself taking the secondary parts with gusto. One almost seems to see the fantastic picture: the slender, handsome, ragged little boy playing Hamlet with the utmost gravity and ardour, while the great burly uncle with the scarlet coat and the wooden leg impersonates with equal gravity the majesty of buried Denmark.

The little London street-urchin grew up in the atmosphere of the showman's booth and the play-house. Beautiful as a gipsy child, with black hair and sparkling brown eyes, well-formed and active as a kitten, he was very early an exploitable commodity for stage purposes, and accordingly his mother, as soon as she saw that he could be made useful, took the earliest opportunity to put him on the stage. At three years old he made his first appearance, as Cupid in one of Noverre's ballets, and from this time onwards he was trailed around the various theatres to appear in the parts of goblins, imps, or the other spirits, good and evil, for which such poor little children of the theatre can be made useful. Never has any great tragic actor, with the possible exception of Friedrich Ludwig Schröder, undergone such an early, thorough, and long-continued training as Kean. From his earliest childhood on he was trained in rope-walking and the most break-neck balancing feats, as well as in dancing, fencing, singing, and boxing, while 'Aunt' Tidswell instructed him in declamation, and Uncle Moses played Shakespeare with him and taught him ventriloquism.

In spite of all this, however, he was no infant phenomenon, no Master Betty, winning gold and renown by his

forced, artificial precocity. No one seems to have found him specially remarkable, or to have expected that any thing particular would come of him, though now and then he had the chance of exhibiting his dramatic abilities in private circles, playing Richard III. in his Sunday clothes, with a little sword at his side, to the immense but short-lived admiration of an audience of elderly ladies.

Thus, in his early years, he went the rounds of London, a little, hungry, unconsidered apprentice to the wandering showman's trade, not taking at all kindly, so far as we can gather, to his professional training, but nevertheless as proud as Punch of his accomplishments. Whenever he got a chance, he ran away from his trainers and wandered about as his own master. Miss Tidswell,<sup>1</sup> with whom, after Moses Kean's death, he seems oftenest to have lived, had to tie him up to the bed-post to prevent his making off while she was out of the house; at one time, indeed, when he took to running away oftener than usual, she had a sort of dog-collar made for him, with 'Drury Lane Theatre' inscribed on it, so that honest finders might know to what address to return him. Sometimes he ran away so far that even such effective means as this could not ensure his return. Once he even got as far as Madeira; enraged by a beating he had received at home, the little fellow made his way on foot to Portsmouth, where he was taken on as ship's boy on a Madeira-bound vessel. He had not been many days at sea, however, before he discovered that the realities of the profession of ship's boy did not at all answer to the interesting imaginary picture which he, in common with most small boys, had formed of it. But, with an originality that few boys of his age could have matched—he was eight years old—he hit upon a brilliant plan for getting off work without missing the coveted sea-voyage. He pretended to have lost his hearing owing to a bad cold, and played the part of deafness with such

<sup>1</sup> Miss Tidswell had for some time an engagement at Drury Lane, where she played subordinate parts, such as confidantes, courtesans, etc., without much talent, it would appear, but with some taste. She was the daughter of an officer, and had had a good education. She had gone on the stage, more from necessity than inclination, when her father's death left her without means of livelihood.—*Secret History of the Green Room*, i. 267.



energy and success that he was sent into a shore hospital at Madeira, and, after the united efforts of the medical experts, continued for two months, had failed to effect any improvement, was declared incurable and sent back to Portsmouth, where, once safely landed, he suddenly regained his hearing, danced a triumphant hornpipe on the quay before his astonished shipmates, and was lost among the crowd.

When he reached an age at which his many and varied talents could be turned into money, his mother reappeared as a chief factor in his existence, making use to the very utmost of his earning powers, till at last, tormented and tired out by her unscrupulous exploitation, he left her for good. On this she once more disappeared, not to emerge again till he had won success and fortune and she could claim her share of these as a mother's right.

The events of his life during several years of his early youth have eluded all research. Some maintain that during these years he was at school at aristocratic Eton, receiving the education of a gentleman's son. This story seems almost incredible, and no substantial evidence for it has ever been forthcoming, though it is not absolutely impossible that it may be true. Certain it is that when he appears once more as a youth, he is still as poor as ever, still as wild and of a mettle as roving, but now, it would seem, he has become conscious of a definite aim in life: to become a great actor.

This goal, however, still lay in a somewhat remote distance. Without friends or influential connections an engagement at any of the great London Theatres was out of the question. Moreover, he was still a mere boy, small in size and insignificant in appearance, and it would appear that the gipsy blood still ran so strongly in his veins that it was hard for him to stay for long at a time in any one place. Accordingly he wandered about, now with one troupe, now with another, so miserably paid and such a bad husband of his means, that he rarely had money for his coach-fare when travelling from one engagement to another, but tramped it on foot with his little bundle of clothes on his back, swimming the rivers, with his bundle

in his teeth, to save ferry-tolls, and not unwilling to accept the hospitality of the peasants' cottages along the road.

And yet young Master Carey, as he was still called, was an exceedingly useful man to have in one's troupe. Nothing came amiss to him. He had been at home from infancy in the 'legitimate' repertory, his training as a dancer had been so thorough, that he could act as ballet-master on occasion, he was an excellent singer, in many towns he was much more popular as Harlequin than as Hamlet, and he was quite competent to add to the attractions of the show by a boxing match with a local bruiser or a performance on the tight-rope, inserted as an intermezzo between the tragedy and the pantomime.

In the course of this strolling life he was at one time in London playing small parts at the Haymarket Theatre, without, however, attracting any special notice or feeling at all in his element. Once or twice his wanderings brought him into contact with one or other of the great theatrical stars; once he even played the lover's rôle in a performance in which the heroine was Mrs Siddons herself, who as far as age went might easily have been his mother, and who at this time of their lives must have looked more like his grandmother. It is not wonderful that the mighty tragedienne was far from enthusiastic when the little, thin, shabby, blackavised youth was presented to her as the gentleman who was to play Jaffier to her Belvidera.<sup>1</sup> It is related, however, that before the rehearsal had gone far the touch of something peculiar and original in him aroused her attention. The other players she corrected in her usual awe-inspiring manner, but when it came to the turn of the 'horrid little man,' as she had at first called him, she sat quite still, gazing fixedly at him, and at last, when he came to the end of a scene, said to him with an impressive gravity: "Very well, Sir; *very well!* I have never seen the part played in that manner before."

Words like these, falling to him from time to time, kept heart in the young player. We may be sure that it was early clear to him that he did not act, and did not wish to act, in the same 'manner' as the others. What had he

<sup>1</sup> The lovers in Otway's *Venice Preserved*.



in common with these tall, handsome, deliberate gentlemen with sleepy, sentimental blue eyes, whom provincial audiences applauded as their ideal stage-heroes? Evidently he was striving to find an artistic form which should give expression to his peculiar temperament—a temperament nervous, unbalanced, wild, now exalted to the seventh heaven, now plunged in the depths of despair, irresistibly drawn towards the night-side of life and of the human soul, infinitely remote from the daylight sobriety of the previous generation. It is evident, too, that he felt how different he was from others, that he was conscious of being abnormal, and, above all, of his great superiority to his surroundings. Doubtless, during the whole of this strolling variety-show period, which lasted long—up to his twenty-seventh year—he was keenly on the watch for the moment when he should see, and should be strong enough in his art to seize, some chance of breaking with his stupid fellow-strollers and still more stupid petty provincial audiences, and going to London to show what he could do before a tribunal that could understand and appreciate him.

Not much understanding fell to his lot in these his years of wandering, and many a time he would go home from the theatre in despair, after a night when he had put all his soul into a Shakespearean part before a completely indifferent audience, which his Harlequin or his comic songs had then roused to wild applause. On such nights he would drink away his cares, and, sleeping, dream himself a great and renowned artist.

He did, however, find two appreciative friends. One was a young actress, Miss Chambers, whom he married when he was twenty; who held to him faithfully through all the bodily and spiritual travails of his life—and these were very many; whom he sometimes forsook, when his restless heart went astray after other women, but to whom he always came back again for refuge and consolation.

The other was the young actor and dramatist James Sheridan Knowles, another youth troubled with vague stirrings of genius, who had been thrown out upon the world, and who longed to be something else, and if possible



something better, than the other aspirants to immortality. As far as acting was concerned his ambition was never fulfilled, for as an actor he was and remained of no account, but he became a much admired dramatic author, probably the most celebrated of his period. Kean evidently looked up greatly to this comrade,<sup>1</sup> a man some years older and much better educated than himself; and Knowles on his part wrote expressly for his friend a romantic play, *Leo, or the Gipsy*, in which Kean made an immense success in the provinces, and which he admired so enthusiastically, that he had set his heart on making his first appearance in London in it, and might probably have succeeded in carrying his point, but that in the meantime he had been so unlucky—or, possibly, so lucky—as to lose the manuscript.

But years of struggle and want still lay between Kean and his longed-for entry on the London stage. He married in 1808, and soon the youthful couple had a weakly little son, Howard, who, to his father's intense grief, died when about five years old. A second son, Charles, well-known in after days as actor and manager, was born a few years later.<sup>2</sup>

Innumerable more or less authentic stories are told of the Kean family's wanderings in the provinces and of the wild doings and escapades of the head of the family. Sometimes they would have a good, regular engagement; sometimes they had none at all, but wandered about with their two children and their dog in a little hired cart from town to town, from tavern to tavern, giving evening 'entertainments' to any audience they could gather, usually a scanty one, at sixpence a head. Whether in or out of an engagement, however, they were always equally hard up. For if their luck was in, a festive cup would make

<sup>1</sup> J. S. Knowles was born in 1784 and died in 1862. He was the son of a schoolmaster, and related to R. B. Sheridan. He wrote a great many plays, which were very successful in their day, and in which it is still possible to discern a certain originality and force, but which display no such poetic ingenuity, and still less any such constructive talent, as might make up for their romantic absurdities. The best known are: *Caius Gracchus* (1815), *Virginus* (1820), *The Hunchback* (1832), and *The Love Chase* (1837).

<sup>2</sup> The date of Charles Kean's birth is not certainly fixed. It is usually stated that he was born at Waterford, 18th January 1811.



good fortune the sweeter, and if luck was against them, all Kean's troubles would be drowned in the bottle.

Still, when they were in employment, Kean was not the man to shirk taking his full share of the burden. For some time they were in the old Irish town of Waterford, and we have an account of their doings on one evening of their sojourn there which is of double value as being authentic, and as throwing a very clear light on Kean's activities in these years, not so very long before his epoch-making London *début*, when he was still a struggling stroller. The story is told by an eye-witness,<sup>1</sup> and runs as follows: "The last thing I recollect of Kean in Waterford, was the performance for his benefit. The play was Hannah More's<sup>2</sup> tragedy of *Percy*, in which he of course played the hero. Edwina was played by Mrs Kean, who was applauded to her heart's content. Kean was so popular, both as an actor and for the excellent character he bore, that the audience thought less of the actor's<sup>3</sup> demerits than of the husband's feelings; and besides this, the *débutante* had many personal friends in her native city, and among the gentry of the neighbourhood, for she had been governess to the children of a lady of good fortune, who used all her influence at this benefit. After the tragedy, Kean gave a specimen of tight-rope dancing, and another of sparring with a professional pugilist. He then played the leading part in a musical interlude, and finished with Chimpanzee, the monkey, in the melodramatic pantomime of *La Pérouse*,<sup>4</sup> and in this *character* he showed agility scarcely since surpassed by Mazurier or Gouffe, and touches of deep tragedy in the monkey's death scene, which made the audience shed tears."

<sup>1</sup> A Mr Grattan: quoted by Dr Doran (*Their Majesties' Servants*, iii. 369).

<sup>2</sup> The well-known philanthropist and authoress, Mrs Hannah More, wrote, among other works, a number of plays, of which the above-named tragedy was the best known. *Percy* was produced for the first time at Covent Garden in 1778.

<sup>3</sup> Query 'actress's.'

<sup>4</sup> *La Pérouse*, or *The Desert Island* was a dramatic pantomime with songs, which was first performed at Covent Garden in 1801. The subject was taken from a play of Kotzebue's and dealt with the casting-away of the celebrated explorer La Pérouse on a South Sea Island, his adventures there, and his struggles for existence, in which he is aided by a faithful man-ape.

But the hour of deliverance from this dog's (or ape's) existence was at last to strike. In the midst of his wretched, poverty-stricken life, Kean had done much to improve himself, as artist first and foremost, so that in this respect he felt that he had now a pretty full command of his means, but also in general culture—in particular he had worked hard to make good the many gaps in his book-knowledge. His letters of this period fairly bristle with Latin tags and quotations, showing clearly the self-taught man's delight in showing off his newly-won learning. He had seen one colleague after another, far inferior to him in gifts, try his fortune at Covent Garden or Drury Lane and obtain a place there without great difficulty; and he now began on his own account to make serious attempts to attain those same holy places. These attempts were for some time vain, but at last, when he was twenty-six years old, and had attained to his full stature as an artist, his ambition was fulfilled. He was offered a trial engagement at the new Drury Lane, then under Whitbread's<sup>1</sup> control; Arnold, the manager, came down to the provinces to see him play, and thought him very good, though half a head too short; and he was able to write joyfully to an elderly friend, Dr Drury, who had done something to smooth the way for him:<sup>2</sup> "... The interview between Mr Arnold and myself has already passed; that gentleman has honoured me with a visit in Dorchester, the result of which I feel will be as satisfactory to you as liberal and exalted to me. . . . You have, Sir, opened a path of happiness to me, so sudden, so unexpected, that I can scarcely think it but a dream."

It was a dream, the constant, ever-recurring dream of his childhood and youth, that was now, at last, to be fulfilled.

<sup>1</sup> See pp. 44-5 above.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Procter: *Life of Edmund Kean*, i. 204 seq.



## II

Kean's début at Drury Lane—His Shylock. Contrast between his art and that of the Classic School—Kean's repertory—His leading qualities as an actor.

ONE fine day—or rather one dark, forbidding winter's day, the 26th January 1814, when the snow was falling in great fleecy flakes, filling the murky streets with dirty, yellow slush—on such a day Edmund Kean stood outside the magnificent new Drury Lane Theatre, in his old travelling great-coat with its many little postilion's capes, his threadbare clothes and broken boots, wishing himself dead.

He had come there for the first and only rehearsal of his Shylock, and that same evening was to be the night of the début, which was to decide his future fate.

Hitherto he had not found much kindness or encouragement in London. His début had been put off and put off. He had had to see two bad actors preferred to him—allowed to appear, and fail utterly, in this same part which now, after a hard struggle, he had at last got leave to play. The great London actors ignored him: his old comrades from the provinces, now safe inside the charmed circle, 'knew him not.' Things looked very black. Kean put up with everything; clinging with desperate energy to the one thought: "Only let me get before the footlights, and I'll show them——!"

And now the time for the morning rehearsal had arrived, and he began to go through his Shylock with Rae (Bassanio), who happened to be one of those old comrades who no longer knew him.<sup>1</sup> The wings were full of actors watching, with faces full of malicious joy, in the hope of seeing a fresh victim sacrificed.

Kean's playing produced an extraordinary commotion

<sup>1</sup> For this reason all Kean's biographers treat Rae as an utterly impossible person. In this, however, they clearly do him an injustice. He seems to have been both a capable and a popular actor, filling an important place in the Drury Lane company. He was a handsome man with a good figure, and his acting in some parts had an effect of life and energy. This, of course, does not alter the facts that, compared with Kean, he was insignificant, and that in private life he was a somewhat stupid and conceited person.



among his watching and listening colleagues, though as yet he only indicated his intentions lightly. In its swift changes, its sudden flashes, it was so utterly subversive of all consecrated tradition that after a short time the stage-manager felt it his duty to step in with good advice. "This will *never* do, Mr Kean," he said—Raymond was his name—"this is an innovation, Sir; it is totally different from anything that has ever been done on these boards." "Sir," answered Kean, "I *wish* it to be so." "It will not do, Mr Kean," repeated the stage-manager; "be assured of it." "Well, Sir," replied Kean, still with the utmost calm, "perhaps I may be wrong; but, if so, *the Public* will set me right." The stage-manager shrugged his shoulders with an indulgent smile, thinking: "Well, let him fail!" Kean went on to the end of the part, and then made his way home in anything but a happy frame of mind. But that day he dined, which was more than he did every day. Perhaps he thought with the poet:

"Hath my hour come? 'Tis well! Let me be no more!  
But—*after* my dinner—not before."

The evening came. Kean trudged down to the theatre through the persistent, driving snow, with a small bundle of the clothing for his part wrapped in a handkerchief—a pair of old black silk stockings, a little linen, and his black wig. He crept in by the stage-door, and reached the far-off dressing-room, which he had to share with two fourth-rate actors. At least and at last he was on the spot. He began to dress and make up. Oxberry,<sup>1</sup> a good-humoured comedian, who was cast for Lancelot Gobbo, came and offered him a drink of brandy and water. He drank it down. Bannister,<sup>2</sup> who was not in the cast, but who was an amiable man of the old school,

<sup>1</sup> William Oxberry (1784-1825) acted at various theatres in various lines of business, but latterly mainly in comic parts. He dabbled in literature too, and published a collection of the most popular plays of the time.

<sup>2</sup> John Bannister (1760-1836) was an excellent character-actor in high comedy parts. Among his chief parts were Sheva in Cumberland's *The Jew*, and Walter in Morton's *Babes in the Wood*. He was particularly popular in the latter part. He came of a family of actors, but was originally bred as a painter, and employed himself in painting during his long period of retirement, after he left the stage in 1815.



came in and said a few encouraging words to him, which he received with gratitude and pleasure. No one else showed him any friendliness. He came down on to the stage. A rumour had already run like wildfire round the green-room that the débutant was going to play Shylock in a black wig. And now all could see that it was true. Shylock with black hair! when he had been played with red hair from time immemorial, and when Richard Burbage's epitaph so plainly said:

"The *red-haired Jew*

That sought the bankrupt merchant's pound of flesh!"

Even if they had not been sure of it before, everyone was perfectly certain now that the new actor must fail.

Kean went forward and peered through the eyelet-hole in the curtain. The great auditorium seemed nearly empty,<sup>1</sup> and not a soul was there whom he knew, except good Dr Drury, the headmaster of Harrow School, the only person who had been of some little assistance to the young actor. Kean's own wife had stayed at home—perhaps she had been afraid to come, and at any rate she had her little boy to look after. The début had not been much advertised beforehand, and it was clear that 'Mr Kean of the Theatre Royal, Exeter,' as he was called on the placards, had not excited much curiosity among the great public. But amidst the occupants of the sparsely-filled benches were some of the leading critics of the London papers, and among these one at least whose judgment meant something and who was worth acting to—William Hazlitt,<sup>2</sup> then writing for the *Morning Chronicle*.

The play began, and went its way in a more than usually drowsy fashion till Shylock's first scene was reached. Then the audience awoke with a start. This

<sup>1</sup> The house could hold over £600, and the receipts for the night were only slightly over £100.

<sup>2</sup> William Hazlitt (1778-1836), was a portrait-painter before becoming a critic. He was dramatic critic at various times to the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Champion*, the *Examiner* and the *Times*. He published a collection of his powerful and penetrating dramatic criticism in 1818 under the title: *A View of the English Stage*, and this book contains some of the finest work ever done in theatrical criticism. He also published a number of works of quite a different nature, e.g. a *Life of Napoleon* in four volumes (1828).

scene of Shylock's first appearance—the third scene of the play,—does not usually receive enough attention from the average audience or the ordinary critic. As a matter of fact it is in this scene that the born portrayer of character can most clearly display his peculiar art: it is this scene that for a discerning critic is decisive with respect to the actor's power of individualizing, of giving life to his creation. The later scenes are in themselves so dramatic, so full of passionate movement, that (except perhaps the scene with Tubal, which also demands a profound identification with the character, if it is to produce its full effect), they 'play themselves,' as the phrase goes, and even in the hands of a middling performer can never be ineffective.

Kean stood the test from the very beginning. From the moment he entered, supporting himself on his crutched staff, with his head on one side, looking up askance at Bassanio, with a smile, half-mocking, half-suspicious, on his lips, and an ever-watchful gleam in his dark, brilliant eyes, good judges could see that they had before them a ripe artist, sure of himself and his tools. As the scene went on and they marked the latent energy in his:

"I *will* be assured I may";

and the transition to:

"and that I may be assured, I will bethink me,"

when they heard the story of Father Jacob's subtlety in the matter of the 'streaked and pied' lambs, told so that it seemed to bring with it a breath from the Holy East; when they felt the logical wit and the passionate scorn of Antonio piercing through the words:

"What should I say to you? Should I not say:

Hath a *dog* money? is it possible

A *cur* can lend three thousand ducats?"

the little band of experts sitting in the theatre became more and more convinced that for the first time for many years there had appeared one of those rare, inspired artists who have power to penetrate into the depths of the human soul and can make the observer see with them a vista of the life, the feelings and the thoughts of the individual



human being. It was this Jew they saw and none other—this Jew, living in this same gloomy house in the midst of the gay city, alone with his money bags, his daughter, his avarice, his faith, his hatred; not the tiresome, generalized composite-picture of a Jew that they were used to see presented by the Kemble school, where the actor seemed to stand eternally outside his character, like a lecturer demonstrating with a pointer, while begging the audience to remember that he himself was really not at all like this, but was a handsome, cultured gentleman, who merely wished to have the honour of showing them how the generic Jew conducted himself.

The enthusiasm aroused by this unwontedly vivid presentation of the character from within mounted by natural degrees, and in the strongly-coloured scenes in the third Act, after Shylock has discovered his daughter's flight, spread through the whole audience. Here Kean was able to give the reins to his wild temperament, with all its unbridled passion, without losing any of the variety of shading which was the surest token of his mastery. After these scenes—those with Salanio and Salarino, and then with Tubal—a storm of applause burst out in the half-empty house, which put a sudden stop to the gossip in the actors' foyer and drew the amazed enquiry from Oxberry: "How the devil can so few people kick up such a row?"

Behind the scenes Kean still walked about alone, concentrated and absorbed in his part. But now his 'comrades' suddenly found that they knew him after all, and crowded round him. The managers and other functionaries became amiability itself, and no longer called him 'young man'; after the third Act he had become 'Sir.'

Only the fourth Act—the great Trial Scene, Shylock's last—now remained, and it was a comparatively easy matter for Kean, with the powers he had already shown that he possessed, to make it a complete triumph. He filled this scene—so incomparably effective in spite of its absurdity—with a wealth of detail and finely shaded transitions which completely dazzled his audience, and by the novelty,



22.—Edmund Kean.



23.—Kean as Shylock.





the unexpectedness, the sudden variety, the inexhaustible life of his playing worked them up into a state of frantic enthusiasm. For them it was a settled matter, once and for all, that London had found a histrionic genius, the like of whom had not been seen since Garrick's days.

Kean rushed home to his wife, dizzy with joy, sure of his future fortune, full already of a hundred plans for the miracles he was to work in new rôles, and the thousand things he was to do with all the money he was sure of earning. "Oh! Mary! my fortune's made; now you shall ride in your carriage," he said to his wife. "Now, my boy"—to his little son Charles, as he snatched him up out of his cradle—"you shall go to Eton!"

The next morning confirmed the fulfilment of his dream. The great newspapers declared with one accord that a new genius had arisen. Even the severe Hazlitt admitted himself conquered. He described<sup>1</sup> his impressions of the memorable evening thus:

"I went to see him the first night of his appearing in Shylock. I remember it well. The boxes were empty, and the pit not half full: 'some quantity of barren spectators and idle renters<sup>2</sup> were thinly scattered to make up a show.' The whole presented a dreary, hopeless aspect. I was in considerable apprehension for the result. From the first scene in which Mr Kean came on, my doubts were at an end. I had been told to give as favourable an account as I could: I gave a true one. I am not one of those who, when they see the sun breaking from behind a cloud, stop to ask others whether it is the moon. Mr Kean's appearance was the first gleam of genius breaking athwart the gloom of the Stage, and the public have since gladly basked in its ray, in spite of actors, managers, and critics."

And in his actual criticism in the *Morning Chronicle*<sup>3</sup> the same critic writes:

"His style of acting is, if we may use the expression,

<sup>1</sup> Not in his newspaper notice, but in the preface to his collected theatrical criticisms: *A View of the English Stage*, p. x. *seq.*

<sup>2</sup> Drury Lane was at this time a joint stock enterprise.

<sup>3</sup> Not, however, in his first notice of 27th January 1814, but in a second, which appeared on the 2nd February.



more significant, more pregnant with meaning, more varied and alive in every part, than any we have almost ever witnessed. The character never stands still ; there is no vacant pause in the action ; the eye is never silent. For depth and force of conception, we have seen actors whom we should prefer to Mr Kean in Shylock ; for brilliant and masterly execution, none. It is not saying too much of him, though it is saying a great deal, that he has all that Mr Kemble *wants* of perfection."

On the purely artistic triumph more material tokens of success were not slow to follow. At the second performance of *The Merchant of Venice* the house was practically full, and the enthusiasm enormous. After the third the financial director, Whitbread, invited Kean to breakfast, not only to express his admiration of the new star's acting, but also to settle the terms of his contract. The verbal agreement had been that, if Kean was a success, he should be given a three years' engagement, at £8 a week to begin with, rising to £9 a week for the second year, and £10 for the third. Kean gladly signed a contract in these terms after the breakfast, but scarcely had it been signed, when Whitbread tore it up and presented him with another, in which the management of Drury Lane undertook to give their new star £20 a week, in addition to a benefit.

This was at the moment a dizzy experience for a young man who up to that time had known only hunger and want. The time was soon to come, however, when his salary was £50 a night, and when even this was insufficient to meet the demands of his extravagant mode of life.

It was now a matter of urgency for the theatre, which was in great straits financially, and to which Kean's appearance came as an unexpected chance of salvation, to put him before the public as early as possible in a new rôle. Richard III. was the part chosen ; and in this part Kean won as great a triumph as in Shylock, and by the same means. The same in this sense, that he had entered as deeply and intensely into this character as into Shylock's, and showed the same force and the same



24.—John Bannister (p. 75).



25.—Kean as Sir Giles Overreach  
(p. 83).





mastery of delicate shades of expression in the embodiment of his conception.

It is a mistake to conceive of Edmund Kean as a mere creature of intuition, an actor who, relying on his temperament, threw himself headlong into his parts, abandoning himself to the promptings of the momentary emotions as they came. All the characters in which he rose to his highest level seem to have been minutely worked out beforehand, and in those in which he was careless and failed to master the text thus thoroughly—and this happened too often in his period of decline—his failure was complete.

"However occupied in the evening," says his first biographer, Procter, whose book appeared soon after Kean's death: "whether in acting or otherwise, he would frequently begin to study when his family retired to rest, and convert his drawing-room into a stage. Here (with a dozen candles, some on the floor, some on the table, and some on the chimney-piece and near the pier-glass) he would act scene after scene; considering the emphasis, the modulation of the verse, and the fluctuations of the character, with the greatest care. In the morning, he would perhaps rehearse a scene or two, exhibit some of his finest 'effects' before his wife, and conclude by inquiring: "Do you think that will do?" And if she answered, as was generally the case, "Oh, it's beautiful!", he would go away content. Yet he would, after all, frequently reject these same effects, when he played the character in public; and, upon being asked his reason for so doing, reply: "I felt that what I did was right. Before, I was only rehearsing."<sup>1</sup>

In his very first London season<sup>2</sup> Kean appeared in a whole series of the principal Shakespearean characters, besides other important parts. After Shylock and Richard III. came Hamlet, Othello and Iago; and in the next season Macbeth, Romeo and Richard II. were added. Of each one of them he made something new, surprising, living, which stirred up the enthusiasm of the great public

<sup>1</sup> Procter: *Life of Edmund Kean*, ii. 85 seq.

<sup>2</sup> Which was actually but half a season—26th January to 16th July 1814.



to a perfect furor, and, what was still better, reawakened the interest of the great spirits of the time in the theatrical art. In contrast with the wide, sleepily-flowing river of classicism, Kean's art was like a pent-in, impetuous mountain torrent, leaping from rock to rock, foaming and seething, thundering and splashing, now glittering like a thousand diamonds in the sunlight, now hiding itself in dark mysterious abysses. Whatever else it might be, it was not art of the soothing, sleep-producing kind. And it seems clear that it was precisely its exciting, rousing quality, not any deep emotional appeal, its biting, stimulating sarcasm, and not any infusion of serene, large-minded humour, that gave it such enormous importance and influence.

The poet Coleridge remarked very aptly: "To see Kean play is like reading Shakespeare by flashes of lightning." But the whole of Shakespeare is not equally well adapted to this style of reading, and accordingly Kean's impersonations of Shakespearean characters were not all equally good. In the parts which demand a more even, softer, warmer light, such as Richard II., Romeo, and some portions of Hamlet, he was not successful—to the first two parts he was unsuited throughout, while in Hamlet he only shone in detached passages. The brooding, introspective monologues were beyond his compass. In an early criticism<sup>1</sup> of his work we read: "Repose, however, is fatal to him; *the whirlwind and the storm are the elements in which he exists*; and in proportion as a character becomes less forcible, Kean becomes less excellent. We are far from asserting that this is always the case, for we are sensible that in some quiet and familiar touches of nature he is particularly happy; but certainly his *forte* does not lie in declamation or level speaking, and *his soliloquies are for the most part extremely insipid*. This is particularly observable in his Hamlet and Macbeth. . . ."

In characters in which bright light alternates with the deepest darkness, in which tempests rage, lightnings flash, the sun breaks out suddenly through the black clouds, in

<sup>1</sup> *The British Stage and Literary Cabinet*, ii. 98 (1818). The criticism is anonymous.



26.—Kean as Coriolanus.



27.—Kean as Richard III. (p. 83).





which the night-side of the human soul bears sway—in these Kean's powers showed themselves in their greatest perfection, and it was the power to produce these effects that made him, as it made his contemporary Ludwig Devrient in Germany, the great romantic actor that he was.

Thus it is that his performance of such parts as Othello (perhaps his greatest achievement), Richard III., Shylock, King Lear, stand out like landmarks in the history of the actor's art, along with such figures as the merciless, villainous old usurer Sir Giles Overreach in Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, in which he nearly frightened the life out of his audiences by his rendering of the old man's raging frenzy in the last Act, or the preternaturally wicked and revengeful negro Zanga in Young's tragedy *The Revenge*, a figure that to a modern taste seems like an exaggerated caricature of Othello and Iago rolled into one.

He was less impressive in out and out 'heroic' parts, at least to suit him the heroism and nobility of the character had to be thrown into strong relief against a dark and gloomy past, a secret crime, or a bodily or spiritual deformity. Heroes of this sort were at this time just beginning to appear on the stage, and they furnished excellent material for Kean's peculiar powers.

Romanticism, with its apparatus of ancient Gothic castles, secret passages fitfully illumined by moonlight, mysterious monks, guilty love, spectral apparitions and awesome portents, had made its appearance in literature long before this; long, indeed, before it emerged as a definite creed. In England its appearance may be said to date from Horace Walpole's fantastic romance, *The Castle of Otranto*, which was followed by a multitude of horrific, blood-curdling castle-romances.

On the stage the Romantic School made its entry almost simultaneously with the advent of Kean. Unfortunately, however, it was not the real poets who became the apostles of romanticism in the English drama. Byron's dramatic work never took root on the stage; the other great writers of the time confined themselves almost



exclusively to narrative romance and lyric poetry, and the drama was left to writers whom it would be a compliment to call second-class, such as "Monk" Lewis,<sup>1</sup> who, with his *Castle Spectre*, introduced to the stage the genuine Romance of Terror, in the German style; Godwin,<sup>2</sup> whose tragedy, *Antonio*, furnished Kean with one of his wildly passionate rôles; Maturin,<sup>3</sup> who felt himself specially inspired by Kean's genius, and wrote for him those overstrained and bombastic dramas: *Bertram, or the Castle of St Aldobrand*, *Manuel*, and *Fredolfo*, of which the first, at any rate, had extraordinary success; and finally Sheridan Knowles, in whose theatrically vigorous pieces, owing to an unfortunate combination of circumstances, Kean had practically never an opportunity of appearing, though Knowles wrote some of them expressly for his old comrade.

In the smooth, temperate, domestic drama of the eighteenth century Kean did not feel at home, and accordingly never cared to play in it. On the other hand he delighted in re-creating the strongly-marked, glaringly-coloured figures of the Renaissance period. Not Shakespeare's creations alone: these were and always had been on the theatrical repertory. The character mentioned above, Massinger's usurer Sir Giles Overreach, a figure moulded on a truly heroic scale, and Marlow's fantastically wicked, raving Jew, Barabbas in *The Jew of Malta*, were also among his favourite parts. He seldom ventured on comic parts, and never felt any great confidence in his powers in this line; though he was certainly far from being deficient in humour, and in his

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818), often called "Monk" Lewis, after his first romance, *Ambrosio, or The Monk*, a book written when he was twenty, which made a great sensation and aroused not a little scandal. He wrote in all fourteen plays: one of which, *The Castle Spectre*, a dramatization of one of his own novels, had an extraordinary success.

<sup>2</sup> William Godwin (1756-1836), best known as novelist and politico-social writer. His novel, *Caleb Williams*, was much read in its time. For the stage he wrote only the tragedy mentioned above (*Antonio*) and another named *Faulkner* (1808).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Robert Maturin (1762-1824)—a typical representative of wild, cloudy, Germanized romanticism, to which he gave expression both in his plays and in a series of novels. His tragedy *Bertram* was very highly esteemed by the critics of the time. Both Maturin and Godwin were originally clergymen.



early youth had been an exceedingly popular Harlequin. Now and again, indeed, he would attempt one of the comic figures of the classical repertory, as, for example, Ben Jonson's delightful little tobacconist Abel Drugger,<sup>1</sup> which had been one of Garrick's very best comic characters. Many thought him excellent in this part—among others William Hazlitt, who in general was inclined to be a severe critic of his work—but he himself was not satisfied, and only played the part three times.

Garrick's widow, who was still alive, and who had shown much interest and friendliness towards Kean on his first appearance in London, because he reminded her so much of her idolized David, wrote to him after his first appearance in her husband's famous part, in the following laconic terms: "Dear Sir, You cannot play Abel Drugger. Yours, etc., Eva Garrick." To which Kean replied no less laconically: "Dear Madam, I know it. Yours, etc., Edmund Kean." A few days later, however, he took his revenge on the old lady when calling on her, by asking suddenly: "Could David sing?" "Sing?—No," answered the lady, a little bewildered. "Well then," replied Kean, "I've one advantage over him—for I can."

The lighter, everyday style of play he avoided, no doubt by instinct, but also, it would seem, on principle. He felt that the magic power of his art lay in the delineation of the extraordinary, the superhuman, the strongly-coloured fantastic. Even such a good part as Joseph Surface in *The School for Scandal* he would have none of, refusing it with the indignation of insulted genius in terms so exaggerated that they might suggest to us the ludicrous airs of a 'leading lady' in her tantrums, if we did not feel behind the apparent arrogance of the words Kean's recognition of his inability to represent smooth, unromantic society characters such as this.

His letters to the management on this occasion are very characteristic. The first runs: "Mr Kean returns to the Committee the character of Joseph Surface, which

<sup>1</sup> In *The Alchemist*. Kean, however, appeared in a modern adaptation of Jonson's play, entitled *The Tobacconist*.



he has, with surprise and mortification, received this day. Mr K. wishes submissively to bring to the recollection of the gentlemen that the material service which he has rendered to the establishment over which they preside, has been by peculiar success in the *first walk* of the Drama; and he will never insult the judgment of a British public, by appearing before them in any other station, but the important one to which they have raised him. . . . He wishes them perfectly to understand that, *whatever is the consequence*, he will not submit to any sacrifice of his talent!!”

To one of the members of the committee he wrote privately at the same time in terms less loftily official, but not less forcible: “I have, with the just indignation of insulted talent, returned, to the Committee, Joseph Surface. I cannot conceive the Committee’s intentions towards me, unless it is to destroy my reputation as an *actor*, and interest as a man. But, without disguise or subterfuge, I tell them—I’ll be damned if they do either.”<sup>1</sup>

It was certainly not the intention of the Committee of Management to ruin either Kean’s fame as an actor or his private interests. Nor did they do so. It was reserved for Kean himself to put an all too early end to both.

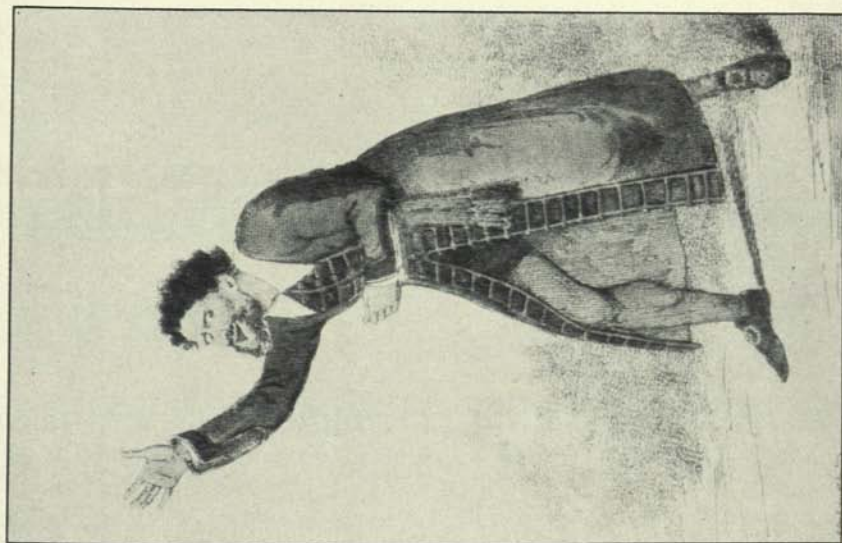
### III

Kean at the summit of his fame—His decline—His private life—A scandalous law-suit—His breach with the London Public—Tour to America—His death.

KEAN had said before his success in London: “Once let me stand on the boards of Drury Lane, and I shall conquer. But if I conquer, I shall go mad.” He did go mad, though not at once, and probably not quite in the way he had expected.

For the first few years good fortune poured in on him from all sides. There fell to his lot the greatest and purest of joys, that of knowing that his art was understood and appreciated, both by the great public and by the fine and noble spirits of the time. He had also the

<sup>1</sup> Letters from Edmund Kean, printed in Procter’s *Life*, ii. 179 *seq.*



28.—Kean as Barabbas (p. 84).



29.—Macready as Rob Roy (p. 88).





great pleasure of finding money, which had hitherto been to him almost an unknown quantity, rolling in upon him in literally untold, and to his eyes quite fabulous, abundance. One of his biographers has estimated that in the first thirteen years of his career in London he must have earned about £220,000. Again, he had the great satisfaction of finding that his personality won him friends in every circle of society, that, in spite of his obscure extraction and gipsy-like past, the great vied with one another in offering him attention and flattery, that he, who a few years back had been a vagabond, ever in need of and sometimes receiving the gifts of charity, was now sought out to occupy posts of honour and trust among his colleagues, being chosen, for instance, as Master and Treasurer of the great Drury Lane Benevolent Fund—an official post for which he was singularly ill-fitted, except in so far as he was, personally, exceedingly generous, and was capable on occasion of making heart-rending and impassioned speeches descriptive of the miseries of want.<sup>1</sup>

But with all this prosperity coming with such extraordinary suddenness to a man so unbalanced and so improvident in worldly matters, it was only too certain that

<sup>1</sup> It was only when he was sober, however, that Kean's speeches were moving and effective. As a rule his friends had to look after him very carefully at official festivities, for as time went on and the bottle went round, his eloquence, of which he was very proud, used to become more and more involved, and so larded with quotations in far from classical Latin, that it was exceedingly hard for his audience to follow him. In some Recollections of Kean which were published in a newspaper soon after his death, occurs the following little dialogue between such a friend and a waiter, which gives a very clear impression of the different stages in Kean's official conviviality. The scene is a Restaurant, and the personages Kean's friend Phillips and a Waiter:

(TIME: 2 A.M.)

*Phillips.* Waiter, what was Mr Kean doing when you left the room?

*Waiter.* Playing the piano, Sir, and singing.

*Phillips.* Oh, come! he's all right then.

(TIME: 2.15 A.M.)

*Phillips.* What is Mr Kean doing now?

*Waiter.* Making a speech, Sir, about Shakespeare.

*Phillips.* He's getting drunk. You had better order the carriage.

(TIME: 2.30 A.M.)

*Phillips.* What's he at now?

*Waiter.* He's talking Latin, Sir.

*Phillips.* Then he is drunk. I must get him away.



things must go wrong. Others foresaw this, though Kean of course did not. Even in those first years, in the very heyday of his fortune, when everything smiled on him, when the public greeted him with frantic applause and the critics exalted him to the skies, Thomas Moore writes of him, as it were with a sorrowful smile: "Poor Mr Kean, he is now in the honeymoon of criticism," . . . and he adds: "Next to the pleasure of writing a man down, your critics enjoy the vanity of writing him up; but when *once up* and fixed there, he is a mark for their arrows ever after."

It was some considerable time, however, before the revolution in Kean's circumstances and his sudden prosperity began to exercise any notable evil influence on his art. True, he very soon developed an abnormal sense of his own value, but this with him never took the form of solemn stupid conceit, as it so often does with less gifted men. Indeed, he had always had complete confidence in his own artistic powers, and his strong sense of his supremacy acted rather as a spur to urge him on to the most strenuous efforts to maintain it in the eyes of others, particularly when any rival appeared to dispute with him his title to the first place.

Such rivalry indeed was not wanting, though it did not proceed from the school of the Kembles. John Kemble was now a veteran, and was looked upon as *hors concours*. Moreover, he retired only a few years after Kean's début. Young<sup>1</sup> and Macready<sup>2</sup> were the two most important members of his school, but both were so completely different from Kean, that there could be no question of any real rivalry in their case either. But a member of the romantic school, J. B. Booth,<sup>3</sup> led away by a small clique of friends, and supported by a good deal of newspaper

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> William Charles Macready (1793/2-1873) became a very prominent actor, and exercised a strong influence on the English stage. His career, however, falls mainly outside the limits of this book.

<sup>3</sup> Junius Brutus Booth (1796-1852) never became anything more than a second-rate actor who sought by factitious means to hoist himself up into the first rank. Even after Kean's death he never managed to thrust himself to the front, in spite of much advertisement and a great display of affected eccentricity à la Kean.

puffery, attempted to lay hands on the divinity, and fared very badly in the attempt. Booth played at Covent Garden, and as, with a certain external likeness to Kean, he combined a knack of imitating his diction and mannerisms, both he himself, and others who had not seen the two together, were misled into imagining that he possessed Kean's genius as well.

Confident of success, Booth now ventured to beard the lion in his den, obtaining an engagement to appear at Drury Lane, as Iago to Kean's Othello. This trial of strength, which was evidently regarded as such by Kean himself, roused intense interest among the theatrical public, and the house was full to overflowing. Kean came down to the theatre perfectly sober, which was not by any means always the case, and, as at his début, showing the calm of intense concentration. His playing at the beginning was concise and clear-cut, as if he wished to give Booth time to collect himself and gain confidence. But scarcely had the movement of the action begun to quicken, when Kean seemed suddenly to grow, to expand, his eyes shot fire, his veins stood out as if bursting, he strode up and down like an enraged lion, to approach him seemed as much as life was worth. And even as Kean's Othello grew to gigantic dimensions, as if borne aloft by the whirlwind of passion, Booth's Iago seemed to cower lower, to shrivel up, to shrink to nothingness. The audience saw and heard nothing but Othello, and were lashed into a state of mingled rapture and terror at the sight of this merciless, half-frenzied unveiling of the appalling tortures of a human soul. Booth disappeared to America, and never again ventured to try a fall with Kean.

But acting at such a strain as this wore upon Kean's nervous system. To soothe his lacerated nerves he drank great quantities of spirits; to string them up again for fresh exertions, and to conjure up the fantastic dream-world in which his wild visions came to him, he drank yet again.

When a man burns the candle at both ends in this fashion, it soon burns up altogether. And, to make matters worse, his private life became more and more eccentric.



His existence seemed typified in his favourite pastime : dashing about on an untamed horse or in a coach-and-four—often to be brought home in a deathlike state of collapse. The thousands he earned melted away in his hands, and no one, least of all he himself, could tell what became of them. Unlucky authors, who wanted him to play the leading parts in their bad plays, accused him publicly of burking their productions, and when their plays appeared and failed, declared that he was responsible for the fiasco. The public took sides for and against him. Such attacks as these did not affect him too seriously, particularly as his friends in the Press and among the public still formed by far the stronger party ; but there came a case in which the interference of the Press and the public in his private life, and their condemnation of his private conduct, had a fateful and decisive influence on the remainder of his artistic career.

Kean had become entangled in a love-affair with a married woman, a certain Mrs Cox, whose husband was a banker and an alderman. He seems to have been much in love with her ; he deserted his wife for her sake, and spent much money on her personally and on setting her bankrupt husband on his feet again. It is not easy to say how far she was deserving of his devotion, but there seems at any rate to be no doubt that the alderman was a singularly contemptible creature, who, knowing of the intrigue, took advantage of the munificence of his wife's lover as long as he could, and then, when the whole matter was becoming too public, brought an action against him and extorted from him a further sum of £850 in 'damages.'

Apart from his original fault in giving way to his passion for the lady, Kean seems to have behaved well throughout the whole affair. But in England, as is well known, matrimonial cases of this kind are conducted with reckless and unblushing publicity, and in this case the papers revelled in details of the famous actor's love-intrigue and in personal attacks upon him.

When Kean appeared on the stage for the first time after the trial—24th January 1825—there was a violent

disturbance in the theatre, and, literally throughout the evening, he was totally unable to obtain a hearing. The next evening the disturbances were renewed, but with somewhat less violence, and Kean, by his masterly playing, managed to bridle the fury of his enemies for a time. But on the fall of the curtain the storm broke out again with violence. After it had lasted some time, the Manager—that excellent actor, Elliston,<sup>1</sup> had the theatre at the time—came before the curtain with Kean. He shook Kean's hand heartily and begged the audience to hear him. Kean now came forward and spoke as follows: "Ladies and Gentlemen! . . . If it is supposed by those whom I address that I stand before you for the purpose of explaining or justifying my private conduct, I must beg leave to state that they will be disappointed, for I am quite unable to do so. I stand before you, ladies and gentlemen, as the representative of Shakespeare's heroes, and by the public voice I must stand or fall. My private conduct has been investigated before a legal tribunal, and decency forbade my publishing letters and giving evidence that would inculcate others,<sup>2</sup> though such a course would in a great degree have exculpated me. I will not submit to be trampled upon by a hostile press; but if the public is of opinion that my conduct merits exclusion from the stage, I am ready to bow to its decision and take my farewell."

These manly words produced a revulsion of feeling, and were received with hearty applause. But the opposition, though from that time it was mainly confined to the adherents of Kean's envious rivals and the professional scandal-mongers of the Press, yet persisted unabated. And finally Kean *did* withdraw.

Externally he had appeared to take the hatred of his enemies, and the disturbances in which it was manifested, with the greatest coolness and calm. But at heart he was

<sup>1</sup> Robert William Elliston (1774-1834), an able, very popular and very sympathetic actor. His management of Drury Lane Theatre (1813 to 1826) was distinguished by great taste and efficiency, but resulted in his ruin. He played serious as well as comic parts: but after his bankruptcy his acting fell off a great deal, and he finally took to drink.

<sup>2</sup> During the trial Kean had absolutely refused to produce Mrs Cox's letters.



cruelly wounded, and he turned for healing and consolation to his accustomed remedy, the bottle. A friend of his, Colley Grattan, who was a witness to his condition at this time, describes it in the following terms: "I never saw a man so changed. He had all the air of desperation about him. He looked bloated with rage and brandy; his nose was red, his cheeks blotched, his eyes bloodshot; I really pitied him. The day I saw him he sat down to the piano, notwithstanding the agitated state of his mind, and sang for me 'Lord Ullin's Daughter,' with a depth, a power, and sweetness that quite electrified me. . . . I could not repress a sentiment of deep sorrow at the wreck he presented of genius, fame, and wealth. . . . His mind seemed shattered; he was an outcast on the world. He left London a few days afterwards, and I never dreamt of seeing him again."<sup>1</sup>

Kean went to America. He was immensely successful; made a fortune, which of course melted away again at once; had occasional differences with the public—in which he does not seem to have been at fault—and committed a number of extravagances, of which the most remarkable was his accepting election as Chief of the Huron Tribe of Red Indians. He took this honour with the greatest seriousness, had magnificent visiting-cards printed with his new Indian name, "Alantenaida"; appeared now and then before his friends in his awe-inspiring Chief's costume, with bead-fringed moccasins and eagle-plumed head-dress, with skins tagged loosely about his person, and large gold rings in his nose and ears; and seriously weighed the question whether he should go back to London or pass the rest of his life as a son of the forest. But he finally chose the former alternative and made his entry once more on the Drury Lane stage, before a public which had naturally forgotten that they had hounded him away with insult only a year before, or, if they remembered, magnanimously forgave him for it. He toured every part of the country and was once more the idolized hero of the stage.

But his strength was broken, and his flame, though not

<sup>1</sup> F. W. Hawkins: *Life of Edmund Kean*, ii. 245 seq.

extinguished, burned with a flickering and uncertain light. The rushing flights to the highest regions of passion, of distraction, which had once come by nature, now cost him the severest physical exertion. The public did not notice this—at least not always. But those around him behind the scenes were often moved to tears by his state, and went in terror lest he should fall down dead before them. One of them, Barry Cornwall, describes his condition thus:

"He was playing Richard III. No one in front of the curtain perceived any diminution of his vigour. But behind! There was the last of the Plantagenets, sitting at one of the side scenes, panting, flushed, and bent almost double by exhaustion. A servant stood by his chair with a goblet of brandy-and-water (evidently very strong) in his hand. It had lost some of its heat, and the tragedian impatiently ordered another to be brought, stronger and very hot. In a minute afterwards the call-boy required his presence on the stage, and there he was accordingly, apparently as vigorous and active as ever, and bringing down from boxes and galleries repeated acclamations. The scene terminated, and we saw him again, a drooping, panting, and exhausted man."<sup>1</sup>

Things went down hill with him more and more, particularly after his last tour to America. His memory failed, and it became practically impossible for him to learn new parts of any importance, though he was anxious to do so and tried his best. He had to go continually lower and lower in the theatrical scale in order to raise the £50 a night which were an absolute necessity to him, playing at last at suburban theatres, where he would berate the audiences when they did not applaud enough. And he was yet but little over forty years old.

He was unhappy, too, in his private life. He had broken with his wife, for whom in his heart he felt a deep affection. He had cast off his son Charles, because the son would not conform to his father's ambition to bring him up as a 'gentleman,' but went on the stage so as to be able to support his mother, for whom there was nothing

<sup>1</sup> Hawkins: *Life of Edmund Kean*, ii. 343 seq.



left out of the squandered tens of thousands. Kean was happiest now when he was sitting in his idyllic country-house at Richmond, playing and singing for his own and his friends' pleasure.

At last came the end, and with it reconciliation.

Charles Kean had developed during these years into an actor of great ability, though wanting in any touch of genius. He had acted in America and in many other quarters, and had now—in the beginning of 1833—returned to London, where he was appearing at Covent Garden. The enterprising manager hit upon the idea of engaging Edmund Kean as well, and getting the father and son to appear together, as Othello and Iago. Edmund Kean agreed, though he was ill and weak. And this appearance was his last.

The sight of the father and son playing together, and the sensation of witnessing, as it were, their feast of atonement, aroused great enthusiasm in the audience. Joy brought a brief return of strength to Kean's worn-out body, and the old fire flamed forth again for a moment. His son was kind and affectionate to him; and when he left the stage with Desdemona at the end of the first Act, Kean sat down well-pleased in the wings, saying: "Charles is getting on to-night—he's acting very well. I suppose that's because he is acting with me."

But the scenes of violent passion, in which in the old days his genius had shone at its brightest, were now too much for his strength. He struggled through till the third Act. But just when he had uttered the beautiful speech, ending with the words:

"Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone,"

he trembled, tottered, clung fast to his son, and whispered: "Charles! I am dying—speak to them for me—" then sank down, never to see the lights of the stage again.

He was taken home. His occupation was indeed gone, his warfare ended. He died less than two months later, reconciled with his wife, and, it would appear, with all the world.

But with Kean passion in the grand style died from off the English stage. He was not the kind of actor who forms a school. Genius, poetry, passion cannot be transmitted to a school. He had many imitators, but none could take his place. For he was always himself.





## PART II

### TALMA AND THE ROMANTICISTS

#### THE PERIOD OF DECADENCE

##### I

The condition of the *Comédie Française* before the Revolution—Conventionality in Dramatic Art and in Literature—Ducis' *Hamlet*—The *Conservatoire*.

IN the latter part of the eighteenth century the French Theatre was in a condition of decadence, similar to that which affected the French State in general, and due to similar causes.

Just as the French State was living upon the traditions of the age of Louis XIV., without seeing, or, at least, without venturing to admit, that that Great Age had long since ceased to be, and that not a single person of any importance any longer supported or believed in the old theories, even so the French theatrical world entrenched itself in the inexpugnable conviction that it was and always had been the first Theatre in the world, and that whatever dramatic art existed outside, *à l'étranger*, was merely a more or less barbarous imitation of the French.

It was confirmed in this conviction by the really excellent external conditions in which it worked: beautiful and tastefully decorated theatres; a stage-technique which, judged by the standards of the time, was highly developed; solid and ample economic resources; and a firmly established school of acting, which handed down the old forms with mechanical regularity from generation to generation, thereby creating a certain perfection of method which did duty for style, though in reality it was only convention. But from the soul of theatrical art, from the



element which should render such art the mirror of the time, the French theatre of this period was as remote as if it had been a Chinese art-form, stereotyped, thousands of years back, in unchanging elegance.

The theatre was a guild, in which all were compelled to work according to ancient, fixed, immutable rules, not a free society of artists, forever developing new aims and seeking for fresh forms. The government of the French Theatre *par excellence*—*la Comédie Française*—the only one privileged to play tragedy and comedy, was indeed free enough in form, inasmuch as it still remained, what we have seen it in the days of Molière, a little republic in which each player held a share in the theatre and had a voice in the decision of all important questions, whether artistic or economic. This form of government was an excellent one, so long as the theatre possessed a natural, born leader like Molière, who in ability stood high above the others, and was capable of guiding the common enterprise on to honour and prosperity. In such circumstances the common interest held individual jealousies in check, and the members of the company found both pride and profit in submitting of their own free-will to the rule of one of their own colleagues, even if the rule were a fairly despotic one.

But when all were pretty much on the same level of capacity, or of incapacity, as was the case in the *Théâtre Français* at the time we have now reached, the republican form of government degenerated into a sort of guild-council, in which it was looked on as the one thing needful to adhere religiously to the rules, and not to permit the intrusion of anything or anyone that could not be made to conform to those rules.

Moreover, in the course of the eighteenth century this formal self-government had gradually degenerated from a reality into a fiction. True, the actors still owned their theatre; true, they still nominally managed their own affairs, divided the receipts, determined expenditure, engaged and dismissed the staff, accepted and rejected plays; but all this they did under the control and supervision of the King, or, to speak more accurately, of the



Court. The four First Gentlemen of the Bedchamber—*les quatre premiers gentilhommes de la chambre du Roi*—were charged with the duty of seeing that the *Comédie Française* was at all times so regulated that it should serve the interests of 'the Court and the City,' and these four Chamberlains were in reality the absolute masters of the Theatre.

In all ages theatrical matters have had a special attraction for people who know nothing about them, and for courtiers not least. And it cannot be denied that Louis XV.'s and Louis XVI.'s Gentlemen of the Bedchamber misused their powers in respect to the theatre to the utmost. Though the *Comédie Française* was essentially a purely private concern, receiving only a quite trifling annual subsidy—12,000 francs—from the King's exchequer for services rendered to the Court, the four Chamberlains interfered in all its affairs, down to the minutest details. The repertory had to be submitted to them—this was the origin in France of the later censorship of the stage—and they not only decided what pieces should be accepted, but also laid down rules for the sequence of productions from day to day, determined how often tragedy should be performed and how often comedy, appointed and dismissed members of the company—a matter in which, in the nature of things, particularly when the fair sex was concerned, they were oftener influenced by their personal sympathies than by artistic considerations—and distributed the parts on similar principles. In a rescript dating from 1768, which shows very clearly how completely dependent on the courtiers were the actors and proprietors of the theatre, we read: "To remedy the abuses which militate against the satisfaction of the public and the interests of the actors (!), abuses which arise from failure to observe the Regulations, We command that the Committee appointed to ensure the execution of Our wishes shall impose on any actor or actress failing to conform to the Regulations a fine of 300 francs. . . . A complete list of all plays in the repertory shall be submitted; and to ensure that the distribution of rôles shall not be determined by intrigues or



caprice, *We will undertake this distribution Ourselves. . . .* We command that in future no play already belonging to the repertory shall be cast by the author, since authors only have the right to determine the cast of their pieces on their first production. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

We must not, however, lay the blame for the decline of the French stage exclusively on the arrogance and tyranny of the Court. A great genius would doubtless have devised some means of forcing his way through these obstacles. Voltaire had known how to do this, though he had no official position in the theatre and no genius for dramatic authorship, simply in virtue of his fiery personality, his intellect and his worldly wisdom. But Voltaire was dead, Lekain was dead, the great actresses Clairon and Dumesnil had left the stage. There remained only a few more or less adroit comic dramatists, of writers of tragedy or serious drama none, or worse than none, and but two men of original talent—Beaumarchais and Sedaine,—along with a crowd of actors of the most complete mediocrity.

It was as though France in artistic matters were completely cut off from the rest of the world, or as if she shut her eyes and ears of set purpose against all that was going on outside. Who in France was aware that men like Lessing, Goethe, Schiller had led the drama into quite new paths, that Ekhof and Schröder had developed a style of histrionic art whose ideals were infinitely remote from those of the French stage? Shakespeare, whom the rest of Europe was now beginning—rather late—to appreciate and admire, was indeed known to some, but by name only. Voltaire, men knew, had named him and made use of him. But who had read him? Certainly not his French adaptor, Ducis,<sup>2</sup> for he knew no English! He writes to Garrick in 1769, when he had just completed his terrible adaptation of Hamlet: "While handling this character, I regarded myself as a painter of religious subjects, working on an altar-piece. But, Monsieur, why do I not understand your language?" Garrick might well have answered this foolish question

<sup>1</sup> Laugier: *Documents historiques sur la Comédie Française*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Louis Ducis was born at Versailles in 1733, and died there in 1816.

with a more reasonable one: "Why haven't you learnt it, my friend?" But that a French author should learn a foreign language, even in order to understand the work of a poet who was his ideal—for Shakespeare, strange as it may sound, was Ducis' ideal—was at this period an inconceivable notion.

His treatment of Hamlet and of other Shakespearean characters—Romeo, "Léar," Macbeth, "Jean-sans-Terre" and Othello—is accordingly a thing that one hardly knows whether to laugh or to cry over. He transforms these mighty, living dramas into floridly-ornate, machine-made conventional tragedies, in which the holy Three Unities are strictly observed, the action taking place off the stage, and in which each of the chief characters has his or her confidant or confidante, to whom are communicated, for the enlightenment of the audience, the deeds of horror, which in Shakespeare hang like black threatening clouds over the consciences of the doers. For instance in *Hamlet* King Claudius has Polonius for his confidant, while Queen Gertrude has one named Elvire, specially invented by Ducis. Instead of the incomparable opening scene between the sentinels on the ramparts of Elsinore, which plunges the audience at a stroke into the atmosphere of the tragedy, Ducis opens the play by bringing the King and Polonius wandering on to the stage, in order that King Claudius may begin:

"Où, cher Polonius, tout mon parti n'aspire,  
En détrônant Hamlet, qu'à m'assurer l'empire."

The Queen is instructed by Elvire in the true function of a confidante in tragedy, viz., to have everything confided to her:

"Avez-vous des secrets que je ne puisse entendre, Madame?"

and then informs her, with some hesitation and not without a blush, that some time previously she has had the misfortune to murder her husband. The action is distorted throughout. Ophelia becomes a daughter of King Claudius; Hamlet remains alive, and we are given to understand that he will obtain the hand of Ophelia.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Jusserand: *Shakespeare in France under the Ancien Régime*, p. 419 seq.



This dreadful hotchpotch was performed,<sup>1</sup> and even had some success, while if the original had been produced it would in all probability have been hissed off the stage.

The fact was that the French public of this period had become so totally unaccustomed to real poetry, and indeed to reality of any kind, that the only thing they saw, or could bear to see, on the stage was the completely conventional presentation of completely conventional feelings, which had not, and had never had, any relation to actual human feelings, or, indeed, to any of the actual phenomena of human life. For them poetry meant verse, and the most beautiful verse was that which, while observing all the metrical rules, achieved the expression of a simple fact in the most ornately roundabout fashion. Even as late as 1830, when the Romantic and the Classical schools were in the midst of their desperate struggle, a tempest of jeering laughter burst from the adherents of classicism when, during the performance of Hugo's *Hernani*, the King asked:

"Quelle heure est-il?"

and was answered:

... "Minuit."

"A King," says Madame Hugo, who speaks of the episode in her reminiscences,<sup>2</sup> "who asks what o'clock it is, and who, in order to ascertain this, merely says 'quelle heure est-il?'—who says it moreover in verse, and is answered, still in verse, that it is midnight, when it would have been so simple to answer:

'Du haut de ma demeure,  
Seigneur, l'horloge enfin sonne la douzième heure,'

—all this in the very nature of the case appeared utterly inadmissible, and the laughter swelled to a storm of hooting."

By a tacit agreement between the public and the authors, which for long remained inviolable, the stage-

<sup>1</sup> First performed 30th September 1769, at the *Théâtre Français*.

<sup>2</sup> *Victor Hugo raconté par un témoin de sa vie*, ii. 280.

play, dramatic composition in general, had, in its relation to real life, been turned, as it were, upside down: right in the one was wrong in the other, and *vice versa*.

How should the unfortunate actors, even if they had been better than they were, have been able to achieve anything really worth while in such a repertory? Talma, who was a genius, felt the impossibility, and though in others' eyes he seemed to have reached the summit of achievement in his art, he looked back on his artistic career with bitter regret. Shortly before his death, in a confidential talk with the young Hugo, who was then writing his *Cromwell*, he cried out: "The actor is nothing without his part, and I have never had a real part . . . a figure that had the movement and variety of life, that was not all of a piece, that was at once tragic and everyday, at once a King and a human being.—Did you ever see me as Charles VI.? I made a great effect in that part with the words: 'Du pain! ju veux du pain!'—because they showed the King suffering, not merely as a King, but as a human being; the effect was tragic and it was true. . . . Truth! I have been seeking for truth all my life. But what good did it do?—I asked for Shakespeare and they gave me Ducis. Truth in the plays was unobtainable; I had to be content with putting it into the costumes. I played Marius with bare legs!—No one knows what I might have been, if I had found the author I was seeking. As it is, I shall die without once having acted."<sup>1</sup>

The generation of actors which occupied the stage when Talma was about to begin his career clearly had no feeling of this kind. As we can accustom ourselves, in looking at conventional decoration, to see a leaf, a face, or whatever the object originally intended may have been, in details which have no likeness at all to such objects, even so the players of that day busied themselves unquestioningly with the ornate *mannequins* of the tragic or comic stage, proud in the consciousness of being the foremost impersonators of these counterfeits of humanity, and happy in their absolute ignorance of the fact that the art of the

<sup>1</sup> Victor Hugo raconté par un témoin de sa vie, ii. 139.



theatre had possibilities far different from and far loftier than their familiar "métier."

Ignorance was not only a source of happiness to these good people, it was one of their leading characteristics. The times were long gone by when French actors had often been authors of ability and consideration, when they came of cultured families, and frequented intellectual society. The players of the new age were as a rule of very humble origin, children, at best, of artisans or small traders—the ladies, indeed, were usually of a much lower class<sup>1</sup>—and nearly all of them were without ordinary education, not to mention artistic or literary culture. Their book-learning often only sufficed to enable them to read their parts, and they were frequently not at all at home in the art of writing. The elegant Fleury, one of the best actors of the period in the light, finical style of the Marivaux comedy, was unable to write a line without mistakes in grammar and spelling. As Samson says of him in his *Memoirs*,<sup>2</sup> he "spoke as elegantly as a Marquis, and spelled like a kitchen-maid."<sup>3</sup>

To be able to speak, indeed, was absolutely necessary, for this was, had always been, and still is imperatively demanded by the public of a French actor; to speak the mother-tongue, pure and unalloyed with dialect, with suppleness and beauty, was the one indispensable condition for being so much as admitted to the *Théâtre Français*, where lack of originality or mediocrity of talent might be condoned, but never defects in speech, or incorrectness, indistinctness or lack of purity in diction.

For the further development of diction, and to give beginners a general training in their craft and knowledge of its traditions, there had been established in the middle of the century an official School of Elocution, *l'Ecole*

<sup>1</sup> There were of course exceptions, as for example the two Sainval sisters, who were of an ancient and noble family, the Alziari de Roquefort, and who (reversing the practice of most of their fellows, who exchanged their plain bourgeois appellations for high-sounding fancy names) concealed their nobility under the modest Sainval.

<sup>2</sup> Samson: *Mémoires*, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> Fleury was at one time in love with the beautiful, witty and ordinarily not unapproachable Mlle. Contat, but was imprudent enough to declare his passion by letter. When the lady saw her admirer for the first time after receiving the letter, she said to him with her most charming smile; "Dear Fleury, you remind me of an engraving; you are best *avant la lettre*."

*Royale de Déclamation*, which all recruits for the *Théâtre Français* had to pass through, and the teachers for which were taken exclusively from among the tried and experienced members of the company. This School, which was closed during the Revolution, was re-established in its final, permanent form under Napoleon I. and, as we know, still exists as the famous *Conservatoire*, in which practically all modern French actors have received their training.

Of the activities of this School of Elocution in the eighteenth century (at which time no such institution existed in other countries, where all training took place either on the regular stage itself or by purely private instruction), the accounts forthcoming from French sources are scanty in the extreme. Most fortunately, however, a Danish actor, Joachim Daniel Preisler, who came to Paris in 1788, on a stipend granted by the Danish State, for purposes of study, visited this dramatic school among other institutions, and gives a very clear description of it in his journal. He writes: "The exercises are held in a small theatre, which is constructed and arranged in miniature so as in all respects to resemble a full-sized one; in order that the pupils may get *le plancher*, as the French call it—that is, to accustom them from the beginning to stand and walk on the stage in a natural manner. Young players of both sexes who still require instruction, as well as students in training, assemble here under the guidance of Mollé,<sup>1</sup> Fleury and Dugazon, each of whom has his day of the week appointed. A few of the elder actors and actresses attend the exercises, which last from ten till two every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. The number of pupils was large, and most of the material seemed good, at least I noticed, even in the case of the beginners, that they aimed at satisfying the ruling French taste, that for tragedy—and in tragedy, for much convulsion and contortion. Dugazon was instructor to-day. He made them repeat scenes here and there, and made constant remarks on voice, declamation, and gesticulation

<sup>1</sup> François-René Molé—see vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), p. 298 *seq.* Fleury and Dugazon are mentioned below.



—in short he let no fault pass without remark. There was only one important objection which I should much have liked to make. He often made them change faulty passages and wrong movements ; but he seldom told them the reasons for the alterations—so that he seemed to be training them rather as machines than as judicious reasoners.<sup>1</sup>

## II

The Actors of the Decadence—Preference for Tragedy—Larive—The Sainval sisters—Jens Baggesen and the younger Mlle. Sainval—Mme. Vestris—The masculine Mlle. Raucourt, Rahbek's judgment of her and that of the Parisians—Mlle. Mars' father—Vanhove and his Danish admirers—Handkerchief and snuff-box.

It is quite true, as Preisler remarked, that tragedy was the ruling taste of the French public, but it is also quite certain that it was not the strong point of the French actors. At this time France did not possess a single tragic actor or actress of the first class, scarcely, indeed, a single player with a strongly marked talent for tragedy. A man like Molé, for example, played Hamlet and other great tragic parts—Molé, who had no turn whatever for pathos, but was excellent in the parts of elegant men-about-town in comedy and domestic drama. And the younger Mlle. Sainval, who showed a charming talent in *grande dame* or *grande coquette* parts (for instance, as the original Rosina—Countess. Almaviva—in *le Mariage de Figaro*), let this talent rust in disuse, while she took, in preference, all the tragic heroines' rôles, presenting them with a sharp, strained vehemence, far removed from the true tone of tragedy.

The tragic heroes' parts—*les grands premiers rôles*—were ordinarily in the hands of Larive, who looked upon himself as the heir to Lekain, but who, assuredly, without suspecting it, had come in for a sadly diminished heritage.

Larive, or de Larive, as he called himself—his real name was Jean Mauduit, and he was the son of a green-

<sup>1</sup> J. D. Preisler, *Journal of a Journey*, etc., i. 233 seq.

grocer of La Rochelle<sup>1</sup>—belonged to that class of actors, not seldom to be found among exponents of heroes' and lovers' parts, who combine with the most excellent physical endowment a quite staggering lack of intelligence and artistic temperament, who have the most intense longing to be numbered among the great artists, but not the least conception in what great artistry consists, and who accordingly pass the greater part of their lives in offended brooding over the question how they can induce people to recognize them as what they are not—namely geniuses.

If externals alone could have done it, Larive would easily have attained his ambition to be a great actor. He was a very handsome man, tall and slender, with a regular, well-shaped head, large expressive eyes, a finely-cut nose, and a soft, rather foolish mouth; his voice was powerful, and at the same time flexible and melodious. With these advantages he could not fail at first to create a certain impression. When he was quite a young man Mlle. Clairon, ever susceptible, though already past her first youth, had become infatuated with him, and had played instructress to him and helped him forward. It was characteristic of him that he would often make a hit in the beginning of a part, but later on would become tiresome by reason of his insipidity and want of dramatic energy and inventiveness. And his whole artistic career was in this respect much like one of his individual rôles. At the outset his manly beauty and fine voice made a great impression, but in the long run people made the discovery that the handsome casket had nothing inside it, and compared him to his disadvantage with Lekain, who, in complete contrast with Larive, was ugly, but brilliant, intelligent, and full of that dramatic vigour which holds audiences up to the fall of the last curtain. When the Parisian public of that age made a discovery of this kind, they were not slow in announcing it very plainly. Larive was several times soundly hissed, and on each of these occasions he left the *Théâtre Français* in deep

<sup>1</sup> Jean Mauduit, alias de Larive, was born in La Rochelle in 1747, and died at his country house at Montlignon in 1827.



dudgeon and sought consolation in the provinces, where he was always sure of a triumphant reception. Yet in spite of his want of talent he was actually the protagonist of the tragic repertory from the death of Lekain to the appearance of Talma. But he was still less capable of bearing comparison with the living Talma than with the memory of Lekain, and he quickly sank into a well-deserved oblivion, which, however, did not prevent him from living a long and happy life in affluence and honour, secure in the conviction that, in spite of all, he was a great tragedian, and that, as he writes himself in an application for election to the Institute, he had "devoted his life to the effort to perfect . . . the most beautiful of all the arts." Curiously enough, too, he was greatly interested in the theory of theatrical art, and when, in his old age, he failed to obtain a post as teacher at the School of Elocution, Napoleon having a horror of his acting, he established a course of dramatic instruction of his own, and even published an unreadable work entitled *Cours de déclamation divisé en douze séances*,<sup>1</sup> which, in combination with the influence of his personal instruction, would doubtless have done a good deal of harm, if he had ever had any pupils worth mentioning. It does not appear, however, that this was the case.

Larive is only interesting as a type of a class of actor which we find constantly re-appearing, and as an example of what the French public had to put up with in the period of decadence between Lekain and Talma.

The 'leading lady' who played with him in tragedy—the younger Mlle. Sainval, whose real name was Marie Blanche Alziari de Roquefort<sup>2</sup>—seems to have been personally somewhat more interesting. She was the younger sister of the Mlle. Sainval who during her comparatively short career in Paris was exceedingly popular with the public, in spite of her remarkable plainness and her bad voice. The elder Mlle. Sainval was an actress of original talent, who, unlike most of her fellows,

<sup>1</sup> It appeared in 1804. Larive afterwards got a literary man to rewrite the book in something approaching a readable form. This edition appeared in two volumes in 1810.

<sup>2</sup> Marie Blanche was born in 1752 and died in 1836: the elder sister, Marie Pauline Christine, was born in 1743 and died in 1830.

had gone on the stage from mere love of it. She produced a great effect by the peculiar, quite untraditional, intonations and emphases of which she made use in delivering the banal rhythms of the tragic alexandrine, intonations now vehement in the extreme, now quivering with emotion—a technique perhaps mainly based on the intellect and owing its effect to surprise, but which yet always offered something new, something standing boldly out from the prevailing sing-song, and which at any rate interested the public and even roused them to enthusiasm. When it came to a contest between her and the handsome but commonplace Mme. Vestris, the public to a man were on Mlle. Sainval's side; but the Duc de Duras, one of the four First Gentlemen of the Bedchamber, who at the time exercised despotic authority over the theatre, happened to be warmly interested in Mme. Vestris, and through his influence her far abler rival was driven from the first Theatre of France, and literally banished to the provinces.<sup>1</sup>

While the elder Mlle. Sainval had genuine talent and originality, the younger was, in tragedy, a mere imitator of her sister. She had the advantage of better looks, though she was short, thin, and angular. She was intelligent and witty, and Beaumarchais was well inspired when he chose her to play Countess Almaviva in his *Mariage de Figaro*. Indeed she had played this line of parts in the provinces and abroad<sup>2</sup> before she was engaged for the *Théâtre Français*. But, once in Paris, she was set on being a tragic actress, and, lacking her sister's genuine feeling and instinct for new and original effects, she had recourse to all sorts of artifices, shrieks, and contortions. The Parisian public regarded her as an accomplished tragic actress, but unprejudiced outsiders, unused to her sharp little person and her strained, mannered, artificial style, looked on her with amazement not unmixed with terror.

When Jens Baggesen, during his stay in Paris in 1789,

<sup>1</sup> This was in 1779. The public missed her greatly, and often expressed the wish to see her again. But in spite of repeated and urgent invitations she could never be induced to return to the *Théâtre Français*.

<sup>2</sup> Grimm asserts that she began her stage career in Copenhagen.



saw her for the first time—in Voltaire's *Tancrède*—he became perfectly hysterical with disgust. He writes: "In all my life I have never suffered more weariness, annoyance, and disgust than during the sickening eternity of time this piece lasted! I had the satisfaction of seeing the most intolerable, ugliest, basest, most loathsome sight I have ever seen, or could possibly ever see on this earth.

"Mlle. St. Val's playing was horribly disgusting! Her mouth-twistings, blubberings, drunken-virago-antics, brewer's-drayman's-liveliness, swinish tranquillity, lunatic-asylum transitions from philosophy to frenzy—her new-born-calf-like smilings, her crazy accesses of despair, her loathsome swoonings, her death, as diabolical as it was long-desired—all these things, separately and in combination, inspired me with sickness and deadly loathing! I would rather have married the filthiest creature in the rest of creation than have touched her skirt with a pair of tongs—so indescribably more than hellishly-loathsome was she to me.

"And this devil (for she was not even womanly enough to deserve the name of she-devil) people actually admired! The same public, who in the National Assembly listen to a Bailly and a Seyes,<sup>1</sup> admired her! Incomprehensible human nature! Still more incomprehensible Gallic Nation—sublimest and most vapid Nation on the earth! But—the *Vapid* disappears, the *Sublime* remains!"<sup>2</sup>

We may take it for granted that Baggesen's impressions of this popular French tragédienne are highly coloured, but so much is certain, that she was not in the least the stuff of which real tragic actresses are made. Still less was Mme. Vestris, though the elder Mlle. Sainval, for all her real talent, had had to give way to her. Mme. Vestris—whose maiden name was Françoise-Rose Gourgaud—was, in fact, handsome and nothing more. Her beauty had in her early days made her a favourite with Karl Eugen, Duke of Würtemberg, in whose Court-troupe

<sup>1</sup> The astronomer Jean-Sylvain Bailly was the first President of the French National Assembly. 'Seyes' is intended for the well-known champion of the *Tiers Etat*, Abbé Sièyes. Baggesen's French is not his strong point.

<sup>2</sup> Jens Baggesen: *The Labyrinth*, Copenhagen 1830, iii. 325 *seq.*



30.—Mme. Vestris (Françoise-Rose Gougaud).



31.—Jacques-Marie Boutet, dit le Monvel  
(p. 114).



32.—Louise-Françoise Conlat  
(p. 118).





of French comedians she made her first appearance; but when she played him false with Vestris—a member of the troupe, and brother of the famous dancer—the Duke cast her off in righteous wrath, after having forced her to marry her lover. She went to Paris, put herself under Lekain's tuition, and gained, by means not unusual, the protection of certain powerful courtiers, particularly of the Duc de Duras, which soon obtained for her a place in the first rank of the *Théâtre Français* company. She never made any real success, indeed at times she was roughly handled by the public—principally, however, on account of her disgraceful treatment of the elder Mlle. Sainval. She had no fire in tragedy, no humour in comedy, but by adhering to the neutral, characterless style of acting, so agreeable to many playgoers, which is sometimes praised because it "never spoils a part," and by means of her unusual beauty, she managed in the course of years to make herself one of the representative actresses of the company.<sup>1</sup>

A tragic actress of much more character was Mlle. Raucourt, whose real name was of course not Raucourt, but Marie-Antoinette-Josèphe Saucerotte. She was the actress whom Rahbek, during his stay in Paris in 1784, admired above all others. He describes her very fully in a letter to Michael Rosing,<sup>2</sup> and as his judgment, besides being particularly well-informed, has the freshness of a foreigner's first impressions, it will not be without interest to quote it here. His opinion of the younger Mlle. Sainval is much the same as Baggesen's, though he expresses his detestation in less fantastic fashion, and does justice to her performance of Rosina in *le Mariage de Figaro*. On the other hand, his enthusiasm for Mlle. Raucourt is much greater than that of the French themselves. He writes: "I have had the good fortune to see most of her (*i.e.* Melpomene's) show-pieces, and also, with the exception of Mme. Vestris, all those idolized actors and actresses with whose continually-trumpeted praises our ears so ache.

<sup>1</sup> Mme. Vestris, who was born in 1743—the same year as the elder Mlle. Sainval—unlike the latter, remained long with the *Théâtre Français*. She did not leave it till 1803, the year before her death.

<sup>2</sup> Printed in Fr. Schwarz's *Pocket-book*, 1785.



But, to speak honestly, not one of those masterpieces or of these superhuman virtuosi has been able to draw from me a single tear, if I except the performance of *Iphigénie*, in which Demoiselle Raucour(t)—an actress whom her audiences fail to appreciate—found the way to my heart. Certainly the credit for part of my emotion is due to the melting Racine, but for most of it I have undoubtedly to thank the actress: her Clytemnestra, a part which would have given one of the ordinary mountebank actresses of tragedy a most desirable opportunity for howling, shrieking, and roaring, was full of a penetrating truth and power. I can still see her attitude, bending forward with outstretched arms and wild eyes, at the passage:

“un prêtre environné d'une foule cruelle!”

She seemed to have the very objects before her eyes—and then the force with which she drew herself up, and said:

“Non, je ne l'aurai point amenée au supplice!”

They complain that Raucour(t) is cold; to me it seems that what Dorat said about Clairon<sup>1</sup> applies absolutely to her. Pride, all the vehement, energetic passions, all those which make reason their accomplice, or borrow its tone, are beyond doubt those in which Raucour(t) too triumphs. . . . Nature has framed her for this line of parts; her majestic figure, her voice, noble but firm—I might almost call it the very voice of a heroine—are of the most excellent effect in them.”

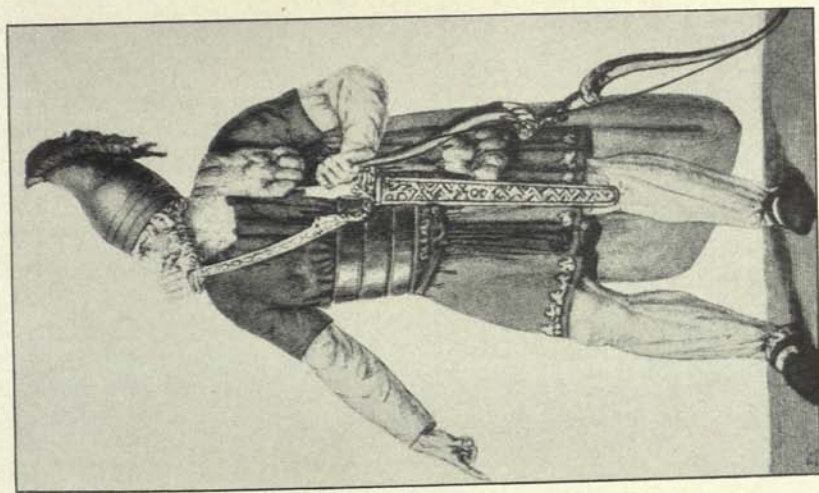
If the Parisian public “failed to appreciate” Mlle. Raucourt, this was in part due to reasons which Rahbek did not know, and which, indeed, had no direct connection with her art. At her début, when she was a little over sixteen years old,<sup>2</sup> she made a quite extraordinary success as Dido in a tragedy by Le Franc de Pompignan. Grimm wrote a long and enthusiastic article about her, and in the *Mémoires Secrets* we read: “The sensation she created is indescribable, and nothing like her has been seen within the memory of man. She is only sixteen and

<sup>1</sup> For Mlle. Clairon see vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), pp. 269-280.

<sup>2</sup> Mlle. Raucourt was born in Paris in 1756, first appeared in 1772 and died in 1815.



33.—Mlle. Raucourt as Cleopatra in Cornille's  
*Rodogune*.



34.—Saint-Prix in the Tragedy of *Pyrrhus*  
(pp. 114 and 144).





a half years old; her appearance is strikingly handsome; she has the most beautiful, noblest, most dramatic countenance, the most enchanting tones of voice, a prodigious intelligence; she did not commit a single fault of intonation. Throughout the whole of this difficult part there was not the least misapprehension, not even a single wrong gesture. A slight stiffness and embarrassment in the use of her arms was the only fault it was possible to discover in her. She is a pupil of M. Brizard."<sup>1</sup>

In very early youth she was as famous for her virtue, or rather for her indifference to men, as for her rare talent for the stage. It soon became evident, however, that there were latent defects both in her talent and in her virtue. Mlle. Raucourt seemed more of a man than a woman, both in her propensities and way of life, and in her art. She had a very masculine figure; her limbs were naturally almost those of an athlete, and she further developed them by practising all kinds of manly sports; she was fond of going about dressed as a man; and all this naturally affected her acting. It probably gained in strength—strength, however, which in her later years became more than a little coarse and masculine—but lost in womanly charm, so that she was debarred from taking the 'juvenile lead'—the young heroines' parts.

Apart from this, her private life soon became scandalous in the extreme. When only twenty years old she was living *en ménage* with a notorious German adventuress, Mme. Souque (Such?), and the two ladies indulged in the most horrifying escapades, scouring Paris in male attire, beating their landlord and his servants when he complained of their wild life, and mixing themselves up in money transactions which ended in landing the young girl in a debtor's prison.<sup>2</sup>

This line of conduct on the part of the young actress turned public feeling completely against her. Whereas she had at first been petted and idolized by the public in

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires Secrets*, vi. 288.

<sup>2</sup> Campardon, in his *Les Comédiens du Roi*, has brought to light the documents relating to a number of police-court cases in which Mlle. Raucourt figured while still quite young.



a degree no doubt excessive and exaggerated, she was now almost maltreated when she appeared on the stage. She neglected her art; and one fine day, when she was cast to play the leading part in Lefèvre's tragedy, *Zuma*, she failed to appear at the theatre, without a word of explanation or excuse. On this her name was struck off the lists of the *Comédie Française* by Royal Order, and she wandered about for three years, till the theatre, hard put to it to find an actress for her line of parts, was obliged to recall her. She reappeared in June 1779 as Dido, the part in which she had made her début.

But, though the administration had overlooked her errors and her defection, the public never really forgave her, perhaps because, being by nature the very reverse of humble, she cared nothing for forgiveness, but went on living the life she preferred—living, one might almost say, *en grand seigneur*.

This explains why Rahbek, five years after her return, found this actress, in spite of her undoubted gifts, still coldly received by the public, while they acclaimed Mlle. Sainval and other greatly inferior tragédiennes.

And while the company thus contained no single tragic actress indisputably of the first class, things were much worse still as regards the men. Larive, empty as sounding brass, was a lamentable enough specimen of a 'leading man' in tragedy, but his under-study Saint-Prix, who was much in evidence, since Larive was sometimes away from the theatre for years at a time, brought the artistic level down to yet lower depths, being nothing more or less than a badly regulated machine for grinding out verse.

The only tragic actor who possessed any intelligence and aptitude was Monvel—Jaques-Marie Boutet in private life—a man of real talent, but so weak physically that he never became the great actor he had dreamed of being. He was the son of an actor, and became the father of one of the most famous of French actresses, Mlle. Mars.<sup>1</sup> He began his career at the *Théâtre*

<sup>1</sup> The mother was the beautiful provincial actress Mlle. Salvétat. Monvel, who was born in 1745 and was thirty-four years old at his daughter's birth, was not



*Français* as Molé's understudy in the 'juvenile lead,' but his hope was to succeed Lekain in his great heroic parts. When Lekain died he made the essay, but finding that he had not sufficient physical strength for this *emploi*, he gave it up of his own free will, when it accordingly fell to Larive. His voice was very weak, and his body almost uncannily thin, but he had a fine, intelligent head and acted with much taste. In 1781 he was obliged to quit France suddenly, by order of the police—there were whispers of an intrigue with a lady of very exalted position—and he went to Stockholm, where he joined the French company maintained by the Court, and became reader to the King, Gustavus III. He remained in Sweden for five years, and then returned, without objection from any quarter, to the *Théâtre Français*, where from that time forth he played *pères nobles* and *grands raisonneurs* with delicate art, but hampered by increasing physical weakness. At last he had reached a point at which he had lost his teeth, his voice and his memory, but he still retained his popularity with the public till his retirement in 1806. He was a zealous republican and a quite capable playwright.<sup>1</sup>

The complete opposite of Monvel, though he played in the main the same line of parts, was Vanhove,<sup>2</sup> Talma's future father-in-law, as stockish, clumsy and thickheaded as Monvel was weakly, keen and finely intelligent. Both had begun with lovers' parts, but Vanhove, by reason of his increasing size, very soon left this line of parts for those of 'Kings' and *pères nobles*. Opinions are very much divided as to his acting—at any rate in the line of 'heavy fathers.' To the Parisian public and the authors he was little more than a 'figure of fun,' a butt for the youthful humorists of the pit, when, as one of the Kings of tragedy, he stumped on, fat and clumsy and heavy-footed, and reeled off his tirades with monstrous, monotonous dulness, only relieved by an occasional mighty roar which

married to her mother. He married some years later, in Stockholm, but not Mlle. Salvetat.

<sup>1</sup> His best play was a comedy, *l'Amant bourru* (1777). Monvel died in 1812.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Joseph Vanhove, son of a wigmaker of Lille, was born in that town in 1739 and died in Paris in 1803. Curiously enough, he acted under his own name.



nearly ruptured his hearers' ear-drums. But the view taken of him by foreign experts is directly opposed to the opinion of his own countrymen. Rahbek, it is true, did not care about him, but Michael Rosing and Joachim Preisler, who were in Paris at the same time, are full of enthusiasm about him. Rosing writes of him that he was "the only one I saw in this play" (Voltaire's *Zaire*) "who was good. He played Lusignan, and seemed to be the only survivor of a better school of tragedy; for the present school has adopted a manner which, at least in my eyes, is very far from nature. He had quite the method of our own late comrade Rose, so that I could often fancy I was seeing that actor in this his best line of parts. Nothing overstrained, nothing unnatural; the noble, high-souled hero, the aged, venerable, tender father, the zealous Christian."<sup>1</sup> And Preisler says of him (as Don Diego in *le Cid*): "One cannot conceive anything more excellent than this man. . . . I call Vanhove the ornament of the French theatre."<sup>2</sup>

We can only account for this diametrical opposition of views about Vanhove by supposing that his weight and solidity and rather sluggish dignity suited the Northern taste, and produced on these two excellent and intelligent Danish actors an effect of naturalness by contrast with the style of exaggerated elegance and affected passion, which for the moment appealed to the Parisian public. But Vanhove cannot possibly have been a really notable actor, far less a great one. In domestic drama he was capable of playing the fathers' parts with a plain and touching dignity, and in this line the public acknowledged his merits, though as the years went on he became too lachrymose. But he was far too deficient in mental power ever to achieve anything notable in tragedy, and he was totally impervious to all ideas of reform. He played, as he had learned to play in his youth, and as he had seen other 'Kings' and *pères nobles*—Brizard, for example—play before him. It is perhaps this fact—that he neither could nor would

<sup>1</sup> M. Rosing's Extracts from his diary of his journey, printed in Rahbek's *Dramaturgiske Samlinger*, ii. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Preisler's *Journal*, i. 254.

indulge in the strenuous effect-hunting then in fashion, but held fast to a traditional routine which they did not recognize as such—that accounts for the strong impression he made on foreign observers. But reasonable reforms were equally hateful to him. When, somewhat later on, Talma managed to carry out his ideas on costume, replacing by historically accurate dresses the idiotic plumes and hoop-skirts which were worn on the French stage right down to the Revolution, Vanhove shook his head despondingly, murmuring: "Tragedy in France exists no longer." Two properties were indispensable to him on the stage: a handkerchief in tragedy, and a snuff-box in domestic drama. He would have given much to introduce the second of these in tragedy as well, and as far as can be gathered his one achievement as a theatrical reformer was to play Louis XIII. in the tragedy of *Montmorency* with a snuff-box. When the tailor to the company brought him his first correct Roman costume, as soon as he had overcome the first shock of repulsion, he began searching it for a pocket for the indispensable handkerchief. And when no pocket was to be found, he said to the tailor, not without dignity: "May I call your attention, honoured Sir, to the fact that during the thirty years and more in which I have been an actor I have always had pockets in my costume, and that I intend to have them in future also.—Do you suppose the Romans did not blow their noses?—Or do you wish to persuade me that they blew their noses with their fingers?" The tailor was obliged to bow to this cogent, though not historically tenable, argument, and Vanhove was provided with his pocket.

Although as time went on the younger generation came to regard the good Vanhove more and more as a subject for ridicule, and the pit often poked open fun at him, yet to the very last he continued to fill a large number of rôles, and was the only real 'heavy father' the theatre possessed. He played occasionally in comedy, outside his own line of parts. Thus in *le Mariage de Figaro* Beaumarchais cast him for Bazile, and he also appeared as Bazile's near kinsman, Tartufe; in both of



these semi-clerical scoundrels' parts he seems to have given great satisfaction. He survived both the great political Revolution and the artistic revolution brought about by his son-in-law, Talma, and died while still in harness, in 1803, at the age of sixty-four.

### III

Comedy—Molé—Mlle. Contat and her Suzanne—Beaumarchais as innovator—League of French Dramatic Authors—*Le Mariage de Figaro* and its significance—Beaumarchais and the King—Prévile and Darincourt—Dugazon and Desessarts—Triumph of *Figaro*.

ALTHOUGH the company of the *Théâtre Français* would never have acknowledged the fact, their strength undoubtedly lay in the lighter kind of comedy. This had perhaps always been the case, and perhaps is so still; yet France has at various times produced tragic performers, both men and women, who rank among the very greatest. It is remarkable, therefore, that just at this period, when France possessed no tragic performer of genius, and when real tragic power seemed to have died out, the fashionable taste was all for tragedy, and comedy, which, in the matter of execution at least, had been carried to perfection, was looked on as an inferior *genre*.

The theatre possessed a staff of artists quite excellent in modern light comedy—less so in the older comedy of Molière and his time.

Molé was still, as of old, the irresistible, fascinating *viveur*; a little mannered as he grew older, a little given to trick and grimace, but still lively and graceful as ever; his creation of Count Almaviva, a part that might have been written expressly for him, had just put a new feather in his cap.

He had to support him Mlle. Contat,<sup>1</sup> an actress who, though much younger than he, was quite worthy of him; she, too, made her greatest artistic success in the memorable production of *le Mariage de Figaro*. In casting this production Beaumarchais had shown himself a keen

<sup>1</sup> Louise-Françoise Contat (1760-1813).

and discriminating judge of the various players' powers. In Mlle. Sainval, through all the mannerism of her performance in tragedy, he discerned the qualities of an excellent Countess Almaviva, and she gained in this part her one and only real artistic triumph; he saw that Mlle. Contat, somewhat too robust in the parts of the 'juvenile lead,'<sup>1</sup> would make a fascinating soubrette, and accordingly gave her the part of Suzanne, in which she enraptured all her hearers. Rahbek, who saw the piece time after time during his stay in Paris, writes of her: "How the French Walter" (*i.e.* Mlle. Contat; Rahbek had previously likened her to Caroline Walter) "must play Suson, you can readily imagine: with what fascinating, exuberant gaiety, with what—how can one describe it? Eyes, mouth, expression, hand, foot—the whole woman is Suson."<sup>2</sup>

It was not only by these bold innovations in the consecrated, ossified system on which parts were distributed that Beaumarchais earned a meritorious place in the history of the theatre. He originated also many other reforms. In his very first plays, the 'domestic dramas' *Eugenie* and *les Deux Amis ou les Négociants de Lyon*—plays which, from the point of view of dramatic art, are not in themselves very notable—he flew in the face of prevailing custom and laid the foundations of modern stage-management, by indicating in his text the costumes, positions and movements of the characters; nay, he even made the very curious experiment of attempting to link up the Acts by a pantomimic representation in the entr'actes of the intermediate action of the plot. This strange idea, however, was never realized.<sup>3</sup>

On the production of his first comedy, *le Barbier de Seville*—which in itself marked a new departure, by reason of its marked freshness of conception, and the comparative realism and originality of its character-drawing—he under-

<sup>1</sup> That is, the young heroine-lovers' parts both in tragedy and comedy. Mlle. Contat made her début in tragedy, but had no success in that line.

<sup>2</sup> Schwarz's *Pocketbook*, 1785, p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> In our age of film-pictures such an experiment might perhaps be worth considering. Indeed it has probably already been tried in the humbler sort of plays.



took the introduction of a practical reform which very certainly was not appreciated by the Sociétaire shareholders of the theatre, but appealed all the more strongly to his fellow-dramatists. The *Théâtre Français* had never been a generous paymaster to dramatic authors; in the old days, indeed, it had paid practically nothing for the pieces it performed.<sup>1</sup> Later on certain rules—altered from time to time—governed the relations of the theatre with authors; and under these, at the period we have reached, the author of a play that filled an evening's bill was entitled to an honorarium equal to one-twelfth of the receipts for each evening on which his piece was performed. This appeared on paper quite handsome remuneration. But the actors succeeded, by a whole series of more or less unscrupulous subtleties of account, in reducing this honorarium very considerably, as, for instance, by excluding from the takings the advance subscriptions for boxes, and the amounts realized for the right to "entrée for life," which was purchasable by payment, once for all, of a lump sum. Moreover there was one provision in the rules which in practice made it impossible for a dramatist to realize any considerable amount, even for a piece which brought in large sums of money to the actors. This was that when the receipts from a play fell, even for one night, below a certain minimum, the theatre could withdraw it, and that in such cases the piece, if again revived, became the property of the company, the author having no further claim to any honorarium. The minimum fixed had originally been 500 fr. for the winter, and 300 fr. for the summer season; but now—in the 1770's<sup>2</sup>—the amounts fixed had risen as high as 1200 fr. for the winter, and 800 fr. for the summer. It was thus in the power of the theatre to appropriate practically every piece performed by it as soon as it had run through its first success, by playing it on unfavourable occasions when it could be safely anticipated that the takings would be small, and,

<sup>1</sup> Alexandre Hardy is believed—though there is no sufficient documentary proof of this—to have been the first dramatic author who was granted a fixed honorarium, and is stated to have received 3 *écus* per play.

<sup>2</sup> Beaumarchais' *Barbier de Seville* was first performed 23rd February 1775.

having by this means brought about its withdrawal, taking it up again under more favourable conditions. And to the discredit of the actors it must be said that they made a shameless use of this shabby expedient, and that, in general, in all the accountings of the two parties, they treated the authors very badly. Many dramatists, accordingly, preferred to have it settled beforehand that they should be entitled to their share for a fixed number of representations, the piece becoming thereafter the property of the theatre. Others—such as Collé, Sedaine, and Piron<sup>1</sup>—turned their backs on the *Comédie Française*, and worked for the Italian Theatre, which treated them much better.

At the time when his *Barbier* was produced by the *Théâtre Français*, Beaumarchais was a very wealthy man. By his large and bold enterprises and lucky speculations he had amassed several millions of francs, and he was not afraid to spend his money freely. He had presented his first pieces, *Eugénie* and *les Deux Amis*, to the theatre, receiving no payment. When, after the great success<sup>2</sup> of the *Barbier*, he insisted upon receiving his share of the profits as well as of the honour, it was, we may be sure, less for the sake of the money than because his keen sense of justice impelled him to try to place the relations between the authors and the actor-proprietors of the theatre on something like a reasonable footing, a matter in which his less businesslike colleagues had hitherto been powerless. After the actors had several times tried in vain to cheat him (no other term will meet the case) in the settlement of his account, and he had each time refused to accept the amount offered him, he adopted the only course open to him for setting matters right, inviting all the dramatists of

<sup>1</sup> Charles Collé (1709-1783), well-known as the author of *la Partie de chasse de Henri IV.*, the first experiment in historical comedy, which was very popular both in France and abroad (e.g. in Denmark). M. J. Sedaine (1719-97), whom Oehlenschläger considered the best comedy writer of this period, is remembered mainly for his amiable and unaffected comedy: *le Philosophe sans le savoir*, and for his numerous comic-opera librettos. He too has been much played in Denmark. Alexis Piron (1689-1773), best known, as dramatic author, for his comedy, *la Métromanie*.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Barbier de Séville* failed on its first performance. But the author shortened it with resolute thoroughness, cutting away a whole Act, and when again produced it made an immense success, being performed more than 100 times in one season.



the day to a meeting at his house, disguised as a dinner-party. By thus originating a trade-union movement of the modern type, he laid the foundation of the powerful *Société des Auteurs dramatiques*, which now rules the theatres almost as high-handedly as the theatres used to treat their playwrights.

Such tough opponents, however, were the privileges attacked, so firmly rooted was the passion for injustice and tyranny, for their own sakes, so to speak, that a social and political revolution had to intervene before the dramatic authors could obtain decent payment for their work from the privileged actors. It was not till 1791, after the outbreak of the Revolution, that Beaumarchais, who with La Harpe and Sedaine represented the dramatic authors' league, succeeded, by the aid of the National Assembly, in carrying his point—that in future no living author's works should be performed at any theatre in France without the author's formal sanction.

If these reforms, due to Beaumarchais' never-failing courage and never-resting energy, were of far-reaching practical importance, his greatest triumph on the artistic side was the performance of his *Mariage de Figaro*, which was indeed the greatest, we might almost say the only, theatrical event of this period of decadence.

*Le Mariage de Figaro* had been completed, and was submitted to and accepted by the *Théâtre Français*, in the latter part of 1781, but it was not performed till the 27th April 1784. The intervening years were spent by Beaumarchais in combating and eventually overcoming the strong resistance, in the most exalted quarters, to the production of the piece on the stage. *Le Barbier de Seville* had passed the Court censorship without much difficulty, no doubt because in it Beaumarchais' *esprit frondeur* was so well hidden under the joyous drolleries of the intrigue, and because the nobleman came off in it with flying colours. But in the case of *le Mariage de Figaro*, things were quite different. Firstly, Count Almaviva was no longer the young lover, outwitting a crafty guardian with the gayest ingenuity, and thus varying the somewhat tiresome part of the traditional *amoureux*, by taking on his own shoulders



part of the rôle of the intrigue-hatching servant. He had now become a calculating *viveur*, whose love for Rosina has cooled, but who nevertheless is as jealous as any guardian, and, guardian-like, is outwitted in the regular course of things by his own valet. But, worse still, this same valet and ex-barber, this Figaro, had developed into a pernicious philosopher, given to reflection on the injustice of existing conditions, a man of the *tiers état* who blurted out audaciously things which no doubt were in the air, which all felt, but which it would never do to have spoken aloud. When the Count tries to seduce his sweetheart, instead of thanking My Lord for wishing to do his humble house so much honour, has he not the audacity to launch out into reflections subversive of all society, saying: "No, M. le Comte! You shall not have her—you shall not have her! Because you are a great nobleman, you think you are a great genius! . . . Nobility, wealth, rank, great employments—all these things make you so proud! But what have you done to earn all these good things? *You have been at the trouble of being born*, nothing more. Otherwise—quite an ordinary man! While I—*morbleu!*, hidden among the obscure multitude, I have had to employ more sagacity and calculation in merely supporting my life than has been shown in governing all the kingdoms of Spain for the last hundred years."<sup>1</sup>

It was thoughts such as these, all expressed in the same bold and witty fashion, that frightened the individuals here and there, who, having a misgiving that the foundations of society were not so secure as was generally assumed, felt that speeches of this kind, applauded with enthusiasm night after night by thousands of members of the unprivileged masses, would be likely to undermine the respect for the King and the Court more than a dozen scientific treatises. King Louis XVI., though not famous for acuteness of penetration, saw this at once, and declared that the piece was "abominable" and "not fit to be performed"; and with this utterance began the struggle between the absolute monarch and Beaumarchais' unique tenacity. The latter eventually triumphed, but the struggle

<sup>1</sup> *Mariage de Figaro*, v. 3.



lasted for years, and to win it Beaumarchais had to exercise throughout all this time an almost superhuman patience and subtlety.

He began by giving readings of his play in private circles, and, as he was an excellent reader and the piece was exceedingly amusing, he soon managed to create a general feeling of curiosity about it. Before long it became the fashion among the families of the *haute noblesse* to get Beaumarchais to read *le Mariage de Figaro* aloud at their entertainments. The feeling grew stronger and stronger, and spread to foreign Courts. The Empress Catherine offered to have the play performed by her French company. But Beaumarchais refused—he would have the *Théâtre Français* or nothing. At last things advanced so far that the King gave permission for the performance of the dangerous play at a great entertainment at which the whole Court was present, but not Their Majesties. And when Beaumarchais' all-powerful adversary had been brought to this point, the grant of permission for the public performance was only a question of time. Autocratic power had finally to bow to public opinion, a public opinion aroused by the curiosity evoked by Beaumarchais among the very party which he was lashing with his satire. On the 31st March 1784, the bold dramatist was able to write to his friend, the old actor Prévillo, who had first created the part of Figaro<sup>1</sup>: "We have both been mistaken, old friend. I was afraid that you would retire from the theatre at Easter, and you thought that *le Mariage de Figaro* would never be played. But one should never despair of keeping an actor whom the public love, nor of the triumph of a courageous author, when he feels he is in the right and refuses to let annoyances annoy him. For now I have the King's permission, old friend!, the Minister's permission, and the permission of the Chief of Police; we only want your permission now, and we shall have a pretty row when

<sup>1</sup> In *le Barbier de Seville*. Beaumarchais had intended that he should play Figaro in the new piece too, but Prévillo felt himself too old for the part—he was sixty-three. He accordingly took the part of the stupid judge, Brid'oison. Regarding Prévillo see also vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), pp. 295-297.

the season opens again.<sup>1</sup>—Well, dear friend, my piece is not so great a matter in itself. But the getting it on the stage is the fruit of a four years' battle—that is why it means so much to me. What a mischief they have done me, these wretched people! Two years ago and my friend Prévile would have made the success of my five acts on the stage a certainty. Now the glory he casts over a minor part will make us regret the more bitterly that he is not playing the chief character."<sup>2</sup>

As Beaumarchais prophesied, there was indeed "a pretty row" (*un beau tapage*) on that 27th of April 1784, when *le Mariage de Figaro* appeared upon the bills for the first time. All Paris that could walk or crawl to the portals of the *Théâtre Français* was assembled there from the early morning; Knights of the Holy Ghost stood cheek by jowl with Savoyards, and both were equally handy at rushing the theatre guards, smashing railings and breaking in doors; three people were smothered in the crowd; ladies of the highest station had managed by much begging to get leave to have their dinner in the actresses' dressing-rooms, so as to be sure of not losing their places. Rank and station went for nothing on this occasion; the only things that mattered were good sharp elbows and a good pair of lungs. Beaumarchais' democratic seed had begun to sprout before ever it had reached the ground.

The performance of the comedy was brilliant—as brilliant as the forces then at the command of the theatre could make it. With the tenacity which characterized him all his life long, Beaumarchais had insisted on carrying out his own ideas—among other things, as we have already seen, he had forced through, in spite of strong resistance, the allotment of the Countess's part to the leading tragédienne of the company, and of the part of Suzanne, that ideal soubrette, to the actress whose line was young heroines—the 'juvenile lead.' It was, however, no doubt a great pity, both in the interests of the author

<sup>1</sup> The theatre was closed during Easter, and the new season was considered to begin when it re-opened.

<sup>2</sup> This amiable letter was first published by Louis de Loménie in his *Beaumarchais et son temps*, ii. 324.



and in those of the public, that the excellent Prévillé felt himself too old to undertake the chief part, Figaro; for Dazincourt,<sup>1</sup> who took his place, was but an indifferent substitute.

Dazincourt was a correct routine player, who had all the tricks of the valet line of parts at his fingers' ends, but who, it would seem, failed to understand, or to give expression to, the human side of the part of Figaro, or the political satire that lay behind it. Rahbek writes about the performance, at a time when Dazincourt had already played this, his first important rôle, more than forty times: "To my mind M. Dazincourt does not understand Figaro, and puts infinitely too much of Crispin<sup>2</sup> into the part. Besides, I know him by heart; I not only know beforehand all his tricks and bits of fooling, but even exactly where he will be standing when he reaches a certain word in a certain speech, at what point he will move two steps forward, at what point one will be sure to see him in front of the Comte d'Artois' box, when he will move his hand, and how he will move it;—and this is not as it should be."<sup>3</sup> There was not much real comic force in Dazincourt. Prévillé said of him, with the candid friendliness of an old actor towards his successor: "*C'est un bon comique, plaisanterie à part.*" But he knew his business, and pleased the public by his cool, confident delivery of his speeches. His Figaro brought him so prominently to the front that he was appointed teacher of elocution to Queen Marie Antoinette herself, who, as we know, had a passion for amateur acting.<sup>4</sup>

Possibly Beaumarchais might have done better if he had given Figaro to Dugazon,<sup>5</sup> who had a much richer

<sup>1</sup> Joseph-Jean-Baptiste Albouy, alias Dazincourt; born 1747, made his début at the *Théâtre Français* 1776; died 1809.

<sup>2</sup> For Crispin see vol. iv. (*Molière and his Time*), p. 127 seq.

<sup>3</sup> Schwarz's *Pocketbook*, 1785, p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> The King, her husband, was far from sharing this passion of hers. On one occasion, when the programme of a Court performance was presented to him, he threw it into the fire, remarking: "That's what I consider this sort of thing worth." Nor was this hobby of the Queen's always appreciated by the noble and aristocratic spectators. One of them once remarked of her playing: "*Il faut dire que c'est royalement mal joué.*"

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Henri Gourgaud, alias Dugazon (1746-1809). He was the son of an actor, and brother to Mme. Vestris.

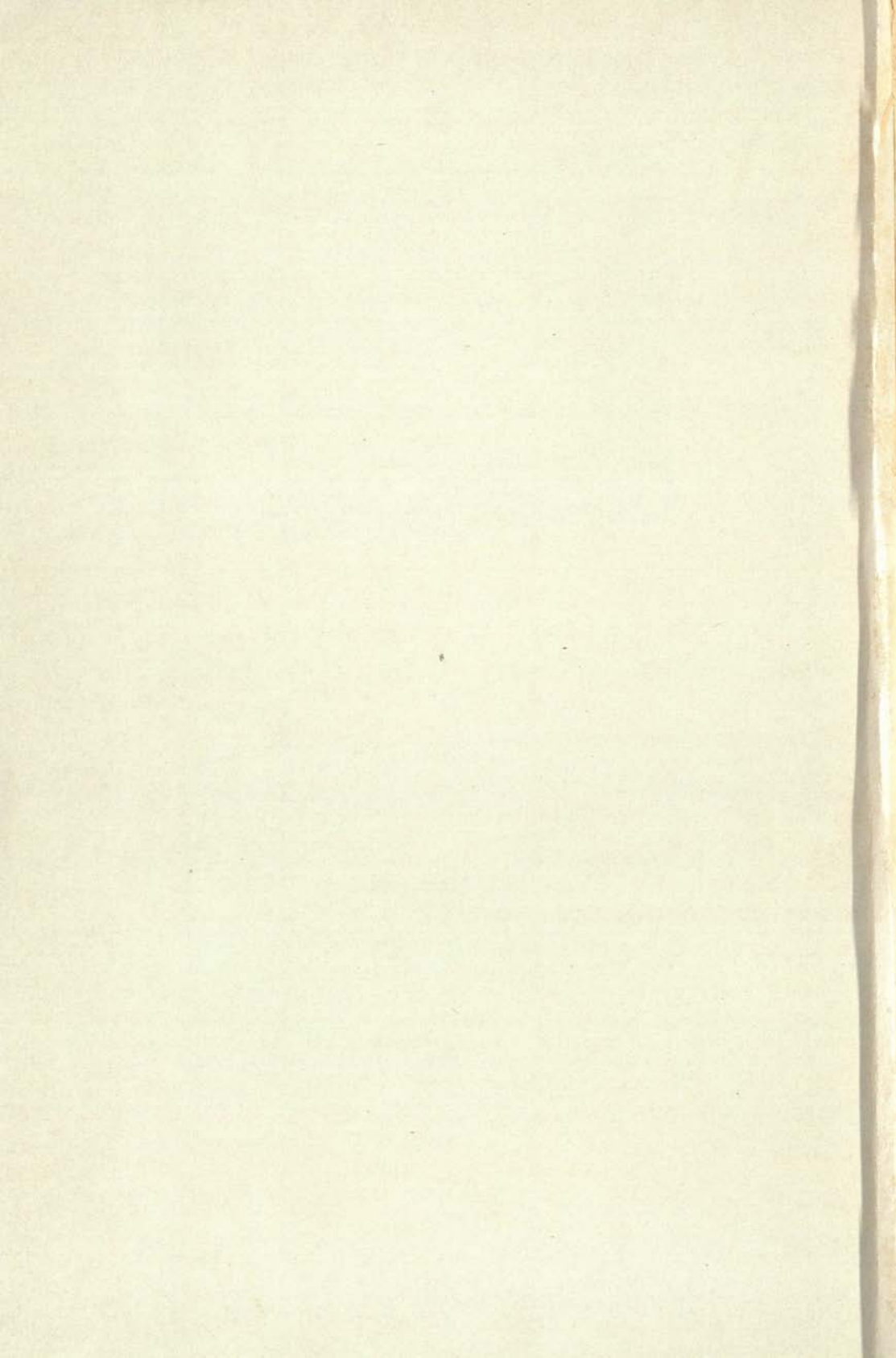


35.—Dugazon as Père Bonnard in  
*Les Amis de Collège.*



36.—Denis Déchanet, *alias* Desessarts (p. 127)





comic vein than Dazincourt, but was also, it must be admitted, a trifle coarser, while he was equally given to all sorts of tricks and foolery both on and off the stage. As it was, Dugazon acted as understudy to Prévile in the part of the idiotic judge, Brid'oison, and was even droller in this part than the veteran comedian himself.

The part of the famous Dr Bartholo, whose craft and wiliness, with the other touches of individual character Beaumarchais has given him, mark him off so distinctly from the ordinary fathers of comedy, just as Figaro is lifted out of the ruck of Crispin-valets, was played, as it had been in *le Barbier de Seville*, by Desessarts,<sup>1</sup> an actor famous chiefly for his enormous corpulence, but also for an amiable turn of humour. Desessarts had originally been a provincial attorney, and had entered on a theatrical career later in life than most of his colleagues, but somewhat better ballasted with general culture. This, however, was nothing in comparison with the ballast he had to carry about in his enormous carcass, and it was the latter that really determined his line of art. He played comic fathers (*les manteaux* or *les grimes*, as they were called), and was excellent in the classical comedy of Molière's time, for example as Orgon in *Tartufe*.<sup>2</sup> But he could not well venture outside this line of parts without risk of provoking laughter in the wrong places. His career was not a long one. He died in the midst of the Revolution (8th Oct. 1793), frightened to death by it, one might almost say. He was at a watering-place taking a much-needed course of the waters, when the news reached him that his colleagues had all been arrested by order of the Committee of Public Safety. He was so much disturbed by the news, that he was struck down by apoplexy and died then and there.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Denis Déchanet, *alias* Desessarts (1737-1793).

<sup>2</sup> Even here his enormous size was a hindrance to him, for no ordinary table was high enough to leave room for his huge body under it, so that a preternaturally high and wide table had to be specially made for him to hide under.

<sup>3</sup> Innumerable were the practical jokes played by Desessarts' comrades, particularly by the privileged jester Dugazon, on their fat friend. Thus on one occasion Dugazon invited him to an oyster-breakfast in a restaurant. Desessarts, who was a passionate gourmand, arrived full of eagerness at the appointed time, and found the party assembled round the savoury bivalves in a



Having in Desessarts and Vanhove supporters already well tried in the rôles of Bartholo and Bazile,<sup>1</sup> Beaumarchais could feel quite safe as to the handling of the subsidiary parts in his piece, especially as he had found for the little *Cherubino d'amore*, his new creation which was to become so famous, a young girl, Mlle. Olivier, whose budding powers seem to have grown out of just such a mixture of childish innocence with a touch of refined depravity as the part requires.<sup>2</sup>

*Le Mariage de Figaro* went its triumphant way. But this brilliant theatrical performance, which was repeated many times in succession amidst the acclamations of a long series of Parisian audiences, flocking to see it in undiminished numbers, was in its inner significance much more than a mere amusement or even an object of artistic enjoyment. Amid all these acclamations the Revolution was creeping steadily nearer. The autocratic monarch, Louis XVI., had for the first time, on a small, apparently insignificant question, been obliged to yield to the persistence of a popular author, a man of the people. It was not long before he had to yield in other matters, matters which neither he nor anyone else, least of all perhaps Beaumarchais, now dreamt of.

small separate room. But when he tried to join his friends, he found that Dugazon had carefully chosen a cabinet the door of which was too narrow to let him through. He had to stand outside watching the others eat, till Dugazon took pity on him and had the food removed to a room with a wider entrance. Another time Dugazon had carried some joke so far that Desessarts, good humoured though he usually was, became seriously angry, and challenged his comrade to single combat. Duels between actors were at that time not uncommon, and the two met in the traditional fashion in the Bois de Boulogne, with their seconds and their rapiers. But, when they took their places opposite each other, Dugazon suddenly shook his head, walked right up to Desessarts and said: "No, no, my dear friend! I can't take any hand in this; it's not a fair match—the surface you present is too enormous. See here!" (pulling a piece of chalk out of his pocket and drawing a circle on his adversary's stomach) "Do you understand? Any hits I make outside this circle are not to count." The duel thereupon resolved itself into a good breakfast.

<sup>1</sup> They played the same parts in *le Barbier de Seville*.

<sup>2</sup> Mlle. Jeanne Adelaide Olivier (born 1764) had not much time allowed her to develop the talent she showed in the part of Cherubino. She died of consumption only three years after her success.

# THE THEATRE UNDER THE REVOLUTION

## I

M.-J. Chénier's *Charles IX.*—The youthful Talma—The painter David and his *Serment des Horaces*—Talma's reforms in costume—Captain Buonaparte and Talma.

ON the 14th July 1789 the Parisian populace stormed the Bastille; on the 4th November of the same year the *Théâtre Français* performed *Charles IX.* for the first time.

The first date, as everyone knows, is now the National Fête of the French Republic; the other date is forgotten, and there would seem at first sight to be no connection between the two events, nor any comparison whatever between them in relative importance.

None the less were they to the contemporary world of almost equal significance; indeed it is far from unlikely that the performance of *Charles IX.*, repeated, as it was, time after time, may have inflamed men's minds more and acted more powerfully in furtherance of the Revolution than the bold and bloody destruction of the ancient State prison, a popular drama which in the nature of things could be performed once only.

*Charles IX.* was a tragedy by a young dramatist, Marie-Joseph Chénier, a less talented and less attractive brother of the highly gifted and unfortunate poet André Chénier. The play deals with the Night of St Bartholomew on purely academic and commonplace lines, and is now so unspeakably tedious to read that it is one of the many mysteries of the Revolutionary period how it can have acted with such electrifying effect on the men of that time. We are obliged to suppose that the audiences themselves brought with them the revolutionary electricity, and that it discharged itself of its own accord, as it were, at the mere sight of a French King ordering a massacre of his subjects, and the sound of a series of tirades about



freedom, empty in themselves, but striking because heard for the first time from a public stage. Jens Baggesen, who saw the tragedy on its twenty-fourth performance, describes his impressions thus :

" Oh, never have Humanity and Art awakened in my soul a more convulsive joy—never have I felt myself so happy in human company as during the time this magic play lasted. The effect was universal. What frantic thunders of clapping and bravos interrupted the actors' declamation more than thirty times in the course of the piece! I myself clapped and bellowed with a heartfelt vigour such as I have never heard before in a theatre. . . . I was told about the author and the names of the actors ; but the piece itself and the effect it produced have made me forget all I heard about these." And he adds in a note: " The fact is that my enjoyment this evening was due more to the pit than to the play or the actors."<sup>1</sup>

Here we have the secret. It was the spectators who were the real actors ; it was the audiences who brought with them ready-made the feeling they manifested ; the public flocked to the theatres, not to enjoy a work of art, but to give vent to their own inflamed feelings, to display their revolutionary ardour, their 'good citizenship' ; and what they sought for in the plays were not poetic beauties, not apt, amusing observation of life, but merely words in tune with the popular feeling of the moment, speeches that could be applied against the ancient monarchical tyranny and in favour of the rule of free democracy on which they dreamed that they were entering.

Thus Chénier's tragedy, flat and uninspired though it was, marked an epoch, as being the first political drama placed on the stage. Not, we may be sure that the author realized this. Chénier was no doubt convinced that his work was new and epoch-making, but believed that it was so in an artistic sense, inasmuch as he was the first to base a tragedy on a French historical subject, putting his alexandrines into the mouths of a king of the House of Valois and those around him, instead of the traditional Greeks and Romans. But since his play was

<sup>1</sup> Jens Baggesen : *The Labyrinth*, III. 304 seq.



put together in all other respects precisely on the model of the pseudo-classical tragedy of the decadence, and since its historical personages were handled without the faintest suspicion of historical sense or power of psychological characterization, as an artistic innovation it was a nullity, and its importance was due exclusively to the intense sensitiveness of the public at the moment to whatever acted on their political nerves.

And yet in one element of the performance an artistically renovating force emerged, though its emergence was due, not to the author, but to one of the players; for in the title-rôle a young actor, who was later to be of the very greatest importance to the French theatre, made his first prominent appearance.

The actor's name was Talma.

This young man had been for some years a member of the company, but one whose capacities were very little thought of, or at least very sparingly utilized. He had played minor parts, and understudied more important ones; had always pleased the public, but had failed to force himself to the front through the ranks of his colleagues, firmly united by their common mediocrity—till of a sudden this important new part fell by accident, almost against his will, into his hands.

That Talma, at the beginning of his theatrical career, led a somewhat lonely life, and had difficulty in asserting himself among his older, but much less highly gifted colleagues, was due to the peculiar course of his development and the peculiarities of his talent.

The actors of the *Théâtre Français* were, as we have already said, a sort of guild, a trades union of specialists. Very few things outside their guild, their special line, could be said to exist for them, and the boundaries of their specialty were for most of them rigidly and narrowly drawn. Just as there were journeymen joiners who had done nothing all their lives but make chair-legs, so in this company there were actors who their whole life long had done nothing but play one special line of parts, Kings, let us say. And just as such a journeyman joiner would inevitably acquire considerable mastery of the art



of making table-legs, so these actors necessarily acquired great skill in personating Kings. But these dexterities being exercised rather in and for themselves, than in relation to the world around, or even to the particular chair or play of which the results were to form a part, it naturally came to pass that all the Kings were as exactly alike as so many chair-legs, and that in the King-handicraft, just as in the chair-leg handicraft, the practitioners' ignorance of all that was stirring in the minds of men outside their special line made it impossible for them to infuse any originality of conception or personal feeling into their work.

To this class of specialists, of which the permanent staff of the *Théâtre Français* company was composed, Talma did not belong; for this reason, among others, that he had already undergone some developing experience as a human being before he joined the theatre.

François Joseph Talma was born 15th January 1763,<sup>1</sup> and made his début on the 21st November 1787. He was thus nearly twenty-five years old when he became an actor, and in those years he had seen much and gained some experience of life. He did not come of an

<sup>1</sup> In later life it was a weakness of Talma's to be unwilling to confess his age, though in other respects he was certainly not unduly vain. His first regular biographer, Regnault-Warin, tells an amusing story in this connection of a conversation he had with the great actor. Regnault-Warin wanted to inscribe Talma's monogram and the date of his birth on a new portrait he was having engraved, and accordingly went to him and asked straight out how old he was. Instead of answering directly, Talma took down four biographical dictionaries from his bookshelves and read from them: 1. Talma (F. J.), born in London, 17th January 1766; 2. Talma, born 15th January 1760; 3. Talma, born in Paris in the month of January 1762; 4. Talma (Jos-Franç), born 15th January 1767. On Regnault-Warin's pointing out that this information was a little ambiguous, and that Talma himself ought to be able to settle the question, the actor replied with a smile: "My dear friend, don't you know that actors, like beautiful women, have no age. . . . A true actor can assume any and every character, so he is of any and every age. . . ." "But the question in this case does not concern the characters, but the man who plays them." "My dear fellow, I'm the very worst person to apply to about my age; it is so long since I was born that I have forgotten it." "Well, then, I suppose the engraver must consult the parish register or—" "Let him strike an average," interrupted Talma hastily, "he may find out the correct date that way." The year of Talma's birth is still differently stated in various biographical dictionaries, but the parish register has since been examined, in spite of Talma's protest, and there is no doubt that 15th January 1763 is the correct date.

aristocratic family, nor had he artistic blood in his veins. His father was a valet, and his uncle a cook.<sup>1</sup> But the father was evidently a man of capacity, anxious and able to better himself. He managed to learn dentistry, and went to London, where he settled and acquired an extensive and profitable practice, which he owed to his introduction of new methods of working. François Joseph was born in Paris, but was still quite young when his parents took him with them to London, and it was not till some years later, when his father was earning a good income, that he was sent back to his native city and placed in a boarding-school, where he was carefully educated, following the usual classical course, and attracted some attention in the school theatricals, particularly by his marked sensibility.

Neither his parents, nor he himself, however, contemplated his becoming an actor. When he had finished his schooling he went back to London, and joined his father as dentist's assistant. It was the elder Talma's hope that in course of time his son would take over his lucrative business entirely. But Fate had other views.

The French colony in London had formed a company for private theatrical performances, and of this young Talma became a zealous and valued member. He was very handsome; having a slender, well-proportioned figure, regular features of a classic cast, a pair of large, dark, brilliant eyes, an exceedingly expressive mouth, and thick, curling black hair, which he wore unpowdered. His whole appearance produced a somewhat sombre effect, as if he had been framed by nature for the heroic figures of tragedy; but this tragic exterior was rather a fortunate artistic gift than a true expression of his character, which was in reality cheerful, sanguine and well-balanced. In these amateur efforts, indeed, he usually played comedy parts in the light pieces which formed the bulk of the repertory of the French colony.

Several years were to pass before his love for the stage finally drew him away from the art of dentistry, and in the

<sup>1</sup> This is shown by his baptismal certificate. See Jal's *Dictionnaire hist. et critique*, Art. Talma.



meantime he had left London—for what reason we do not certainly know<sup>1</sup>—and settled in Paris.

But his sojourn in London had produced important and lasting effects. In the first place he acquired from it a close acquaintance with the English language and with English ways, which was in itself a rarity; and secondly, it made him familiar with English literature and dramatic art, a familiarity which he cultivated with a passionate zeal. Shakespeare, as a matter of course, became his idol, and he was able to see for himself and study the performance of the master's works in their native land. This acquaintance with the genius and the art of a foreign country was to give him in later years an immense superiority over his French colleagues, with their abysmal ignorance in such matters. He returned from England equipped with knowledge which at the period was exceedingly uncommon in Paris, and with eyes and mind fully opened to a world of poetry and art which stood in the sharpest opposition to the poetry and art of contemporary France, and which to him seemed nature as opposed to affectation, truth as opposed to artifice and insincerity.

We may be sure that plans for introducing this nature and truth on the French stage were already working in the young dentist's mind, but he continued for more than a year looking after his patients and his practice before making up his mind to venture the decisive step. He entered as a pupil at the newly-established School of Elocution, later the *Conservatoire*, where the teachers at the time were Molé, Fleury and Dugazon; and, curiously enough, was assigned to the special guidance of Dugazon. This arrangement, preposterous in appearance, by which a pupil of distinctively tragic endowment was placed in the hands of a teacher who was as distinctively a comedian, may probably in Talma's case have had fortunate results. He was left to develop his innate powers practically without interference, while he learned of his lively and waggish instructor a number of things that he might well have found it hard to master without assistance. Facial

<sup>1</sup> His biographer Regnault-Warin connects this move with a somewhat improbable story of an affair with a lady of very high position.



expression was Dugazon's specialty, and for a young actor seeking for novelty of effect a mastery of truthful and vivid play of countenance was of special importance. Most of the tragic actors of the time trusted for their effects to artificial voice-production and exaggerated gesture, while letting the face, the mirror of the soul, remain blank and expressionless. "A vulgar actor," said Dugazon, "plays with voice and gesture; a great performer plays with his face." He himself had an immense command of vivid and significant facial expression, and cultivated this branch of his art in a most scientific spirit. On an opponent once maintaining that the nose at any rate was a part of the face which had no expression, Dugazon proved to him that the nose is capable of no less than twenty-four distinct movements.

Dugazon became much attached to his young pupil. In spite of the considerable difference in their ages—Dugazon was older than Talma by seventeen years—they had many sympathies in common (notably in respect to politics, in which they were both ardent revolutionaries), and the friendship they formed proved a lasting one.

On the whole Talma was on the best of terms with his teachers while studying at the School of Elocution, and his handsome appearance and other gifts soon won him a place in the front rank of the students, though his previous upbringing and his peculiar views on theatrical art made it difficult for him to feel sincere enthusiasm either for the instruction at the school or for the examples of tragic art he saw presented at the *Théâtre Français* by those who in theory should have been his models. He still felt uncertain, too, whether he should choose acting as his profession, principally because he doubted his ability to carry through to success the innovations of which he dreamed. At length, however, he decided to accept the opportunity which was offered him of appearing at the *Théâtre Français*, as Séide in Voltaire's *Mahomet*. The début took place accordingly on the 21st November 1787, and was as successful as such débuts usually were, but certainly not much more so. He took his place in the company as a promising young pupil, to whom were assigned



parts of little importance, and who did not inspire much interest in anyone except the older actors who had won celebrity in his line of parts—these, in pursuance of an ancient and apparently inexpugnable theatrical custom, thought it wisest to keep down this young man with the subversive ideas as long as possible.

To experts his talent was unmistakable. The Danish actor Preisler, who saw him at this time, when he had made no mark and was as yet quite unknown, writes about him (10th June 1788): "As an afterpiece *le Marchand de Smyrne*<sup>1</sup> was performed (*N.B.* without music). The whole piece seemed to me a mere burlesque. The great Dugazon was Kaled; but—he was nothing compared to Gielstrup.<sup>2</sup> Talmad (sic), a pupil from the School of Elocution, played the part of Dorval (the lover) with true feeling. In the school exercises I saw him rehearse some powerful scenes from the part of Don Rodrigo, in *le Cid*, and he played them in my opinion much better than St Fal."<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, during this period of comparative unemployment as an actor, Talma was far from being idle, or neglecting any opportunities for self-improvement. His political sympathies brought him into touch with a number of men of talent outside the theatre, and of these acquaintances two in particular had an important influence on his development.

One of these was the painter Jacques Louis David, who both in politics and in art shared Talma's revolutionary

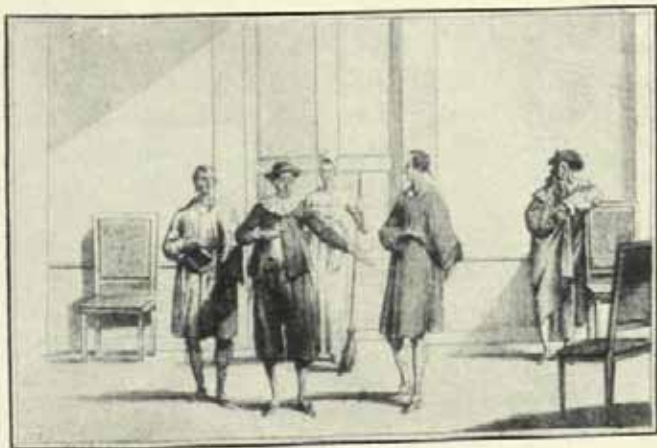
<sup>1</sup> *Le Marchand de Smyrne*, Comedy in one Act by Chamfort. It was performed as an afterpiece to *le Cid*, in which Talma did not appear. *Le Marchand de Smyrne* was produced at the Danish Royal Theatre in a German adaptation, with music.

<sup>2</sup> A Danish actor.

<sup>3</sup> Saint-Phal, whose real name was Etienne Meynier (1752-1835), had at that time a far greater reputation than Talma, and it is much to Preisler's credit that he at once discovered Talma's superiority. Of Saint-Phal in *le Cid* he writes, the same day: "Either he sobbed too loud, or he sent his voice tumbling down headlong so that there was no perceptible modulation." Samson makes a similar remark about Saint-Phal in his *Memoirs* (p. 65): "He forced his voice up to its highest pitch. There he paused, and, to produce an effect of naturalness, feigned a sort of stammer, and then sank his voice again to the most sombre tones of his lowest octave. This was a device by which he never failed to gain applause." Saint-Phal's best part was Meinau in Kotzebue's *Menschenhass und Reue*.



37.—Saint-Phal in *L'Abbé de l'Épée*.



38.—Grand-Mesnil in *L'Avare* (p. 143).





views. His picture, *le Serment des Horaces*, which was exhibited at the Salon the year before Talma's début, evoked amongst the younger men a storm of enthusiastic applause and of contempt for the ornate and gallant style previously in fashion. This picture, the high-flown pathos of which strikes us nowadays as somewhat theatrical, could not fail to impress the youth of the period as the very essence of noble simplicity and manly strength, embodying as it did precisely that ideal of austere Roman civic virtue which was the watchword of the time. To a young actor like Talma it must have appeared a revelation. All the reforms which it was his dream to effect in theatrical art, he saw realized by this painter, who dared to represent the heroes of antiquity without plumes or garlands, without white gloves or silk stockings, without powder or patches, with naked, muscular legs and arms, with ponderous weapons and armour, with manly faces and their own hair and beards. There is no doubt whatever that this and other pictures by David, and personal intercourse with the great painter, who had made a thorough study of Greek and Roman antiquities and was minutely acquainted with the details of classical costume, exercised a profound influence on Talma's artistic development. Its immediate effect was to open his eyes to the pictorial aspect of theatrical art, an aspect to which everyone concerned had hitherto been completely blind.

Naturally he burned with eagerness to realize in practice his newly-acquired knowledge and his new ideas. But an actor is not a painter, who can choose his themes and methods according to his own wishes. No opportunity came to Talma of working out his theories in a great tragic rôle. None but tiresome minor parts—'confidants' or 'messengers'—fell to his lot. At last, however, he made up his mind to a bold stroke. If he was to have no chance to give utterance to the feeling and passion pent up in his soul, he could at least show his understanding of the art of costume. He was cast to play a very minor character in Voltaire's *Brutus*—the tribune Proculus, who has a part of just fifteen lines. And in all secrecy he had made for himself a Roman costume correct in every detail, a tunic,



leaving the arms and legs bare, sandals, short hair and so forth ; and in this light and airy dress, which, in its glaring contrast with the elaborate finery of the others, must certainly have seemed to verge on nakedness, he appeared on the stage for the performance.<sup>1</sup>

His appearance created general laughter and not a little scandal amongst his older colleagues. The sprightly Mlle. Contat called out delightedly : " Oh ! Just look at Talma ! What a fright ! He looks just like an antique statue ! " But Mme. Vestris, Dugazon's handsome sister, who was less easy-going, and, at this period at least, did not share her brother's advanced opinions, was seriously scandalized. She did not catch sight of Talma till she herself was on the stage, and while Brutus was addressing her in a long and solemn tirade, an unrehearsed piece of dialogue went on in a whisper between her and Talma-Proculus : " But — Talma. Your arms are bare ! " — " The Romans had their arms bare too. " — " But you have nothing on your legs ! " — " The Romans had nothing on their legs either. " — " *Cochon !* " And with this exit-speech she sailed off the stage, supported on Brutus' arm and swinging her hooped petticoats.

The public, however, took Talma's innovation in better part ; indeed it was received with enthusiasm by the younger spirits. But the young reformer found it quite impossible to convert his older colleagues to his new ideas. Years had still to pass before something like a reasonable style of costume was introduced for classic tragedy, and even then the change was made in the face of energetic protests from the elder actors.

If his intercourse with David had, as we have just seen, an extraordinary influence on Talma's views of art, another acquaintanceship, which he made not long after, was to be of vital importance to his future theatrical career. Talma gives an account of its origin in his *Memoirs*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It was not customary at this period to hold dress rehearsals, nor did the theatre supply the dresses. Each player had to arrange privately for his or her own costume.

<sup>2</sup> These *Memoirs* were published in 1849-50, in four volumes, " collected and arranged from family papers " by Alexandre Dumas. In many respects—perhaps in most—they have an apocryphal air, and the reputation of the editor



39.—François Joseph Talma as Brutus  
(p. 132).





One evening, some time after the production of *Charles IX.*, Talma was sitting in the artists' foyer with some of his comrades after the performance was over. Another of the actors, Michaud,<sup>1</sup> came up and joined them, and with him came a young man in the uniform of a Captain of Artillery. It was quite an ordinary thing at that time for strangers to be brought into the theatre behind the scenes, and no one paid any particular attention to this newcomer.

"I, however," says Talma, "being more accustomed than the others to notice types and faces, could not refrain from observing this young officer closely.

"He was short, thin, and very dark; his long smooth hair hung down over his temples almost to his shoulders; his vivid, fiery eyes would at times assume a fixed, gazing look, gazing, it seemed, not at anything in the outside world, but into himself.

"Michaut looked about for me, and when he caught sight of me he motioned to his companion and they came up to me together.

"Talma," said Michaut, 'here is a friend of mine, Captain Buonaparte, who wants to make your acquaintance and congratulate you. He has seen your *Charles IX.*, and admired it very much.'

"I bowed.

"Capt. Buonaparte is an Italian?' I asked.

"No," he answered hastily; 'I am a Corsican.'

"He then shook hands with me and said: 'M. Talma, you were excellent as *Charles IX.* Only you made him, perhaps, a somewhat gloomier character than he actually was.'

"Why, M. le Capitaine,' I said, 'it seems to me that the King who was the author of the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew——'

for untrustworthiness does not tend to strengthen our confidence in them. But certain passages bear the stamp of intrinsic probability, and the account quoted in the text of the first meeting between Talma and Napoleon seems to me to be one of these.

<sup>1</sup> Antoine Michaud or Michot (1767-1827); a jovial comedian who had come to the *Théâtre Français* from the half-pantomimic sphere of the *Théâtre de l'Ambigu-Comique*. He was of little note as an actor, but was a zealous Democrat.



"'Oh, let us get our facts clear, M. Talma' said he, leading me across to a sofa; 'it was not the poor little Kinglet, Charles IX., that was the author of the Massacre of St Bartholomew; he was utterly incapable of hatching out a plan like that. . . . It was to his mother, Catherine the Florentine, it was to the Guises, and especially the Cardinal of Lorraine, the ablest politician of the whole family, that that notorious night of the 24th August was due. Charles IX. only played confidant—not exactly what you theatrical people call a "super," but quite a minor part.'

"'Then what is your conception of Charles IX.?'"

"'Oh, a nervous, melancholy young man. By the way, you brought out very well the stamp of fatality that men who die young always show.'

"'Then you believe in the existence of such marks of destiny?'

"'Assuredly I do. The mark may not be on the man's forehead, but, if not, be sure it lies hidden in his heart. There are few great men, I am certain, who have not had a presentiment of their greatness. As to Charles IX., he was certainly not naturally a bad man. He had to bow to political necessity.'

"'Religious, I suppose you mean.'

"'No, no! make no mistake, M. Talma. Assuming that the Night of St Bartholomew was a crime at all, it was certainly not a crime of religion. It was a political act, pure and simple. The question to be decided was not whether the Mass was to be celebrated in Latin or in French, but whether the House of Valois was to continue to reign, or the House of Bourbon, or the House of Condé, to ascend the throne——'"<sup>1</sup>

They go on discussing this and other similar politico-historical subjects, till Talma, astonished at the young officer's acquirements, at last breaks out:

"I must say, M. le Capitaine, you have read a great deal!"

And Buonaparte answers: "Yes, I have read a great deal," adding in a low tone, and with a smile: "and thought a great deal too. . . ."

<sup>1</sup> *Memoires de Talma*, iii. 202-208.

Talma's acquaintance with this man, who bore the mark of destiny in his heart, if not on his forehead, never became a real friendship, but, such as it was, it proved lasting, and Napoleon, when he had reached the climax of his destiny, did not forget that as a young and unknown soldier he had found in the young actor a kindred spirit.

## II

Talma as Charles IX.—The conflict within the *Théâtre Français*—Political complications—The disruption of the old Theatre.

ON the 1st April 1789 Talma obtained his permanent appointment—that is, became a *sociétaire*—but, in accordance with the time-honoured distribution of the 'lines of business,' only as the representative of *les troisièmes rôles* in tragedy. But Larive, who was 'leading man' in tragedy, had left the theatre in a huff the year before, and the only actor then in the company who took precedence of Talma was Saint-Phal, a weak and mannered performer, who was unfit to hold a candle to the younger man. Nevertheless, since his début, Talma had not been given a single independent rôle of any importance, and that now, at the long last, such a rôle fell to him, was due mainly to accident.

As soon as the storming of the Bastille had made it clear that the Revolution had established itself, Joseph Chénier wrote to the Committee-on-Plays of the *Théâtre Français* demanding the production of his tragedy. It had long before been submitted, ready for the stage, but the authorities of the theatre, even if they had dared, did not wish to produce it. Even now there was some delay, and it was only by an energetic expression of 'the will of the people' that the theatre was finally compelled to put it in rehearsal. The title-rôle should, according to rule, have been played by Saint-Phal, but he declined it—partly on artistic grounds, and partly because he was afraid of offending the monarchist party. The part therefore fell to Talma, and he threw himself upon this, his first important task, with all his youthful energy. The part as it left its author's hands



was thoroughly tedious and conventional. But Talma was set upon presenting at all costs something new, something that had not been seen before, and he adopted the plan, often followed by youth, of working from the outside inwards. He studied the pictures of the young King, who, feeble and morally impotent, though not altogether incapable, was as weak in his nervousness, his sickly conscience, as his mother, Catherine de Medicis, was strong in her total unscrupulousness; and he succeeded in presenting a picture of the degenerate Valois striking in externals at least, and, for the time, quite amazingly truthful in its historic colour. A critic wrote of his playing in the following terms: "The art with which Talma represented the weakness, the hypocrisy, and the cruelty, a horrible mixture of which made up the character of Coligny's murderer, the scrupulous accuracy of his costume, and above all his by-play, produced, in combination, a deep impression. But he did not avoid the faults which unfortunately seem inseparable from his remarkable powers. He is often monotonous, and oftener still has recourse to screaming, a trick which in his case is probably due to lack of experience, but which he should leave to men of mediocre talent."<sup>1</sup>

This seemingly well-considered criticism shows that while, even at this early stage, Talma had learned to body forth his ideas in pictorially effective form, he had not yet acquired the art, in which he afterwards attained such mastery, of breathing life into the words of his part, of exercising the same command over his delivery as over his facial play. He succeeded in producing a striking general impression of the character he had to represent, and this, at a time when characterization in tragedy had become a lost art, was in itself a great advance; but he could not yet make every speech, every word of the part, seem to be inseparably connected with, to spring inevitably from, the character. As is often the case with highly gifted beginners, he could represent vividly the outlines and local colour of

<sup>1</sup> This fragment of criticism is quoted both in Talma's *Memoirs* as edited by Alexandre Dumas, and in Regnault-Warin's *Memorial of Talma*. In neither case is the original source named; there are slight differences in the wording of the two quotations, but the meaning is the same in each.



the figure, but was still lacking in the power to fill in the details required to bring it fully to life.

Even as it was, however, his performance of Charles IX. brought Talma triumphantly to the front. "*A partir de ce moment, je fus classé,*" he says himself.

But, along with this new movement in art, the political revolution forced its way inside the highly conservative walls of the *Théâtre Français*. The performances of *Charles IX.* gave occasion, as we have already said, to a series of tumultuous 'liberty-demonstrations'; but things became even worse when the piece was laid aside, after a brilliant career lasting throughout the season.

Not all the members of the *Comédie Française*, not even the majority, were, like Talma, adherents of the popular party. Among the principal *sociétaires* only Dugazon and his sister Mme. Vestris, Monvel, the young actress Mlle. Desgarcus, and Grand-Mesnil,<sup>1</sup> a recent recruit, really shared his opinions. All the others were zealous royalists, and the demonstrations to which the performances of *Charles IX.* gave rise were as displeasing to them as they were to the King and the Court.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, as soon as the audiences drawn by the piece began to fall off in numbers, they gladly seized the opportunity to remove it altogether from the repertory.

Talma, who, while he had made himself a name, had also made enemies among his seniors, was given no more important parts, and fell back again into the modest sphere of general utility. Charles IX. was the one and only rôle originally 'created' by him; thus the shelving of

<sup>1</sup> Jean Baptiste Fauchard, *alias* Grand-Mesnil, joined the *Théâtre Français* at a comparatively late age, after playing previously at Brussels and Bordeaux. He was born in 1737, and was originally an advocate. He had made a name for himself in Belgium and the great provincial cities before he was summoned to Paris to act as understudy to Desessarts, whose health was infirm. But Desessarts, who was his colleague in a double sense, having himself once been a lawyer, did all he could to prevent the new recruit from gaining a foothold in the repertory, and for this, among other reasons, Grand-Mesnil joined the opposition, and seceded with them from the *Théâtre Français*. His most famous part was Harpagon in *l'Avare*.

<sup>2</sup> The day after the first performance of Chénier's tragedy the *Théâtre Français* received a communication from *Monsieur* (afterwards Louis XVIII.), notifying his relinquishment of his box in the theatre. See *Mémoires de Talma*, ii. 128.



the piece practically put an end to his opportunities of acting. For the author, Chénier, too, the withdrawal of his piece long before it had exhausted its power of attraction meant a serious loss, and he protested energetically. The public took the side of the young artists, who were popular for their liberal opinions as well as for their talent, and one fine evening it came to pass that M. de Mirabeau, Deputy for the city of Marseilles, rose in the parterre and demanded, in the name of his Provençal colleagues, that *Charles IX.* should be revived. These Deputies, he said, were anxious to see the piece, and, as they were leaving in two days, he must request that the performance should take place the next night. Hereupon the curtain rose and discovered on the stage Naudet,<sup>1</sup> a strong Conservative partisan, and Mlle Lange,<sup>2</sup> while Talma stood in the wings, awaiting his cue.

Great shouts of "*Charles IX.! Charles IX.!*" now went up from the audience, while there were protests of "*Non! Non!*" from a small minority. Mlle. Lange was nearly fainting. But Naudet, who was a man of nerve, stepped calmly forward and explained to the audience that a revival of *Charles IX.* was for the moment impossible, as Mme. Vestris, who was the Catherine de Medicis, was indisposed, and Saint-Prix,<sup>3</sup> who played the Cardinal, was also unwell. On this Talma suddenly appeared from the wings and assured the audience that Mme. Vestris was by no means so indisposed that she could not perfectly well play her part in *Charles IX.*, and that, as for the Cardinal's rôle, another actor could

<sup>1</sup> Jean Baptiste Julien Marcel Naudet made his début at the *Théâtre Français* at the age of forty-one, and soon attained a certain standing in the company, though rather by his strong personality than by any particular talent. Talma says of him in a private letter, printed by Regnault-Warin (p. 363), that he "played comedy like a Capuchin monk" (that is to say, with a snuffle), "and tragedy like a recruiting sergeant." He was a tall, strong, rather violent man. He was born in 1743, left the theatre in 1806, but did not die till 1830.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Françoise Elisabeth Lange (1772-1825), was an actress of 'young heroine' parts, as frivolous and extravagant as she was young and pretty. Her career was a short one. At twenty-five years of age she married and left the stage.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Amable Foucault, alias Saint-Prix (1759-1834), was constantly in requisition for 'Kings' and 'Heroes' parts. He was a tall, stately man, with a resonant voice, very phlegmatic and dignified, but not at all brilliant. He belonged to the conservative faction, and was imprisoned with his other Royalist colleagues during the Terror. He retired from the stage in 1818.

go through it, reading the part, if the honoured public would agree to this course. The honoured public were delighted to agree, and accordingly the next day the much-debated drama was actually on the bills and was duly performed, amidst a tremendous commotion, in the course of which the military had to be called in to keep order in the auditorium, and no less a person than Danton himself was arrested and taken to the lock-up.

Behind the scenes the waves of controversy ran higher still. Naudet and Talma had a violent quarrel, which led to blows and eventually to a duel—the first of the political duels which became so common during the Revolution. Chénier, Mirabeau and Talma published open letters about the affair. Talma violently attacked "The Blacks," the nickname given to the faction among his colleagues who obstinately maintained the ancient privileges, and "The Blacks" retaliated by turning Talma out of the company.

The news of the dismissal of the popular favourite from the *Théâtre Français* was no sooner spread abroad than it occasioned a commotion scarcely inferior in violence to the political upheavals of the time. In cafés, clubs and academies throughout the city a prodigious agitation arose in favour of the injured actor, and, on the evening of the 16th September 1790, his adherents crowded into the theatre in enormous numbers. Hardly had the curtain gone up when shouts arose from many hundreds of voices: "Talma! Talma! Talma!" Some conservatives in the audience tried to oppose the demonstrators, without the least success. Their efforts only increased the hubbub in the auditorium, in face of which the actors on the stage could only scurry about helplessly, at their wits' end what to do. At last some of the *sociétaires* succeeded in inducing the audience to listen to a few words, to the effect that the reasons why Talma was no longer appearing at the *Théâtre Français* would be communicated to the public the following evening.

Presumably the object of the *sociétaires* was to defer any discussion of the matter with the public till they had



a sufficient number of their own adherents in the theatre to give them substantial support. If so, the plan was partially successful. The next night the theatre was filled to overflowing with the friends of both parties; and the waves of strife were soon running high in the parterre. After a few preliminary skirmishes the noise increased to a deafening roar, and the parterre became like a living forest, bristling with clenched fists and waving sticks, while up in the boxes elegant ladies screamed with terror, while refusing on any account to quit their places, for fear of missing the *dénouement* of this thrilling drama.

At last the curtain went up, and the elegant Fleury, the doyen of the company, appeared, all in black, advanced to the footlights and, speaking in the midst of a breathless silence, said: "Ladies and gentlemen! The company of the *Théâtre Français*, holding the conviction that M. Talma has betrayed their interests and occasioned a breach of the public tranquillity, has unanimously decided not to have any further connection with him, until the matter has been definitely settled by higher authority."

The effect of this little speech was to set the parterre once more in a blaze. The conservatives applauded and shouted: Bravo!, while Talma's friends, who were much the more numerous party, hissed and hooted frantically. Then, of a sudden, there happened something so totally unexpected that the audience, prepared though it was for almost anything, fell silent once more, this time from sheer astonishment. Out from the wings rushed the most popular comedian in the company, the master-*farceur* Dugazon, notorious for his endless practical jokes and mystifications both on and off the stage. Naturally expecting that some new prank was coming, the audience were struck dumb with amazement when the comedian, with the greatest warmth and seriousness, addressed them in these terms: "Gentlemen! What the Theatre decides in M. Talma's case must apply to my case also! I defy the members of the Theatre, one and all! It is untrue that M. Talma has betrayed the interests of the



40.—Fleury.



41.—The Theatre in the Rue de Richelieu (p. 149).





company and caused a breach of the public tranquillity! His only crime consists in his having told you that it was perfectly possible to play *Charles IX*. That's all I have to say!"

With these words Dugazon quitted the stage and walked out of the theatre. He was to have played the leading part in the piece which was on the bills for the night, and it was impossible to improvise any other performance. His words, however, had produced an immense effect, and no one dreamed of leaving the theatre, which was soon transformed into a sort of political club. One orator after another took the floor, and the assembly found a chairman in the editor of a newspaper, who indulged in a ludicrous imitation of the President of the National Assembly, constantly ringing an enormous bell he had somehow managed to get hold of. The railings separating the parterre from the stage were soon surmounted, and the stage seized for use as a rostrum; chairs and benches were smashed, and patriotic songs sung—all in honour of Talma and his gallant friend Dugazon. Till close on midnight the old House of Molière resounded to this uproar; then the audience at last decided to betake themselves elsewhere, and this night at the theatre came to an end, amidst frantic hooting and yelling and the most fantastic gambadoes, in the Garden of the Palais Royal, where the National Guard at last stepped in and dispersed the mob before any blood had been shed.

But the struggle was by no means at an end. A few days later the orders of 'higher authority,' which the *Comédie Française* had said they would await before coming to a final decision about Talma, were received. 'Higher authority,' however, was, since the Revolution, no longer the King and the four First Gentlemen of the Bedchamber, but the Mayor and the Municipal Council of Paris; and the decision issued by them was that Talma and Dugazon should be readmitted as members of the *Comédie Française*.

This decision merely reopened the conflict in a new form, for the players, failing to understand the new conditions, and still looking for their instructions to the



Court rather than to the civic authority, refused to obey the order. They were totally unable to grasp the fact that in this new time the will of the people went for more than the will of the Court, or even the will of the King.

In spite of the agitation of men's minds over so many burning questions of far greater importance, this controversy about the appointment or dismissal of an actor was far from being regarded as a trifle, and the Municipal Resolution was printed and posted up in all the quarters of Paris. When the rumour that the party in possession had refused to obey spread among the people their rage was boundless, and found vent without delay—26th September 1790—in a night of rioting beside which the scenes described above must have seemed comparatively peaceful. There was something like a pitched battle in the theatre, with crushing, howling, and such an appalling din that it seemed as if it must rend the walls of the old play-house in sunder.

The climax had been reached. The next day the authorities ordered that the theatre should be closed until the company complied with their orders for Talma's readmission. This at last produced the desired effect—Talma's refractory colleagues gave way, and the young tragedian made his re-entry in triumph after two months' exile.

Thus the bitter conflict between the old and the new principles ended in the conclusion of an apparent peace, and in victory for the party of revolution. But both the victory and the peace were only apparent. The passions of the combatants had been roused to such a pitch that it was impossible they should immediately be appeased again. Scarcely had Talma returned when two of the best actresses of the company, Mlle. Raucourt, who was indispensable for tragedy, and Mlle. Contat, the undisputed leader in comedy, gave in their resignations. Both declared that they declined to belong to the same company as Talma, who, they considered, brought discord and contention with him. Indeed the internal conditions in the *Comédie* were now quite intolerable. The two factions—the "Blacks" and the "Reds"—were in as sharp opposition to each other as the parties in any political assembly; and though



this state of things may probably be natural and inevitable in such assemblies, in a theatrical company it is fatal. After a season filled with constantly renewed tumults and disturbances in the theatre, the revolutionary faction, Talma, Dugazon, Grand-Mesnil, and Mme. Vestris, determined to secede from the old company and start a new theatre.

That they were in a position to do this was likewise a result of the new political conditions. Under the *Ancien Régime* the *Comédie Française—les Comédiens ordinaires du Roi*—was a privileged institution. No other theatre in Paris was permitted to perform either tragedy or comedy. Indeed, before the Revolution there were in all only five regular theatres in Paris: the *Académie royale de musique*, i.e. the Opera; the *Comédie Française*; the *Théâtre Italien*, which had a repertory of musical pieces, now ordinarily performed in French; the *Théâtre Nicolet*, which gave spectacular pieces and pantomime; and the *Ambigu-Comique*, for low comedy and farce. After the abolition<sup>1</sup> of the monopoly, in the period 1791-1799, the number of theatres increased to forty-five, and these performed any and every class of play indiscriminately. In one of these new theatres, built in the Palais Royal, but running through to the Rue Richelieu, the seceders took refuge, calling their new theatre "Le Théâtre Français de la rue de Richelieu."

The new theatre had a great advantage over the old in its position. In our days the Palais Royal is a mere shadow of what it was in the days of its glory. But in that age, and especially during the Revolution, it was the pulsating heart of Paris. Nothing could happen of which the news did not straightway find currency in the Palais Royal, and the first impulse to many of the great and terrible events that convulsed Paris proceeded from this ancient quarter of the town. Nowhere could a theatre which aspired to be 'in the movement' be better placed

<sup>1</sup> The privileges were abolished by a decree of the National Assembly of 19th January 1791. The first paragraph of the decree runs: "Any citizen may erect a public theatre and give performances therein of plays of every description, provided that, before the institution of his theatre, he has given due notice of the same to the local Municipal Council." Within the first year eighteen new theatres were established.



than beside this glowing furnace, which in those days was known as "the capital of Paris." The old *Théâtre Français* lay in aristocratic isolation in the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

The new enterprise<sup>1</sup> at once manifested its political tendencies by opening with *Henry VIII.*, a new piece by M.-J. Chénier, in which the proceedings of another crowned murderer, played by Talma, were well calculated to stir up anti-royalist feelings.

Now began an intense and obstinate competition between these two theatres, the old *Comédie* and the new *Théâtre de la rue de Richelieu*, the object in view being apparently to decide, not so much which should carry off the artistic laurel, as which should flatter most successfully the views of its own political party.

The old theatre, relying for support on the monarchist party, sought in its choice of pieces to afford the royalists a welcome opportunity to give vent to their feelings. The theatre in the Rue Richelieu, on the other hand, openly acknowledged and displayed its revolutionary temper; but it must be said to the credit of the young enterprise that at the same time it spared no pains to raise the artistic level of its productions. Besides *Henry VIII.*, and a third tragedy of Chénier's, *Caius Gracchus*, Ducis' adaptations of Shakespeare's *Othello* and *King John* were produced; and though these pieces may seem to us now to be of little account, they were the best available at the time, and had the advantage of furnishing Talma with parts which gave him an opportunity of developing his rich tragic endowment. Moreover, in thoroughness of study and rehearsal, and in careful attention to historical correctness in the costumes and the staging of its pieces, the new theatre far surpassed the old-fashioned company of the *Comédie Française*.

The war between the two theatres was quite open and avowed, and raged in its full force from the very first performance in the Rue Richelieu. Indeed the *sociétaires* of the old theatre were accused of having tried to create a

<sup>1</sup> It was not, like the old, a body of co-sharers, but was under the management of two Directors, Gaillard and Dorfeuille.

disturbance during the performance of *Henry VIII.*, and this gave rise to a long and exceedingly bitter newspaper controversy.

### III

The 'Republican' and the 'National' Theatres—Disturbances at performance of *l'Ami des Lois*—Imprisonment of the players of the *Comédie Française*—*Le Jugement dernier des Rois*—Charles de Labussière to the rescue—Art under the popular régime—The two companies reunited.

WHILE the two theatres were thus consuming their energies in petty hostilities, the last acts of the great tragedy of royalty were being played out on the political stage. With the deposition of the King, on the 10th August 1792, the theatres entered on a new phase of their struggle. The theatre of the Rue Richelieu at once made profession of its popular sympathies by taking the name of *Théâtre de la Liberté et de l'Egalité*, afterwards changed to *Théâtre de la République*. The old *Comédie Française* became *le Théâtre de la Nation*.

Amidst all the overwhelming events that now followed each other in quick succession, the theatres went on playing undisturbed, endeavouring to make their repertoires fit in with the political events of the moment. It was not till the outbreak of the Massacres of September that all stage performances in Paris were suspended for a time. And by the end of that same terrible month of September, which had witnessed the execution of more than a thousand victims, the theatres were open again, playing to crowded mob-audiences, drunk with blood, and eager to display and exercise their newly-won power.

The old *Théâtre Français* was now in a very difficult position. The extreme Radical section of the public looked on its proceedings with the utmost suspicion, regarding it as a hot-bed of counter-revolutionary activities; while the Moderates demanded the performance of pieces that gave them an opportunity for demonstrations against the anarchist tyranny. The actors themselves do not seem to have realized the extreme danger of their position, and this made an early catastrophe inevitable. That the issue



was less tragical than it might well have been was entirely due to a lucky combination of circumstances.

At the very beginning of 1793 the incorrigibly reactionary *sociétaires* had the temerity to produce a play which was certain to produce a storm, of enthusiasm on the one side and fury on the other. The piece was called *l'Ami des Lois*, and its author was Jean Louis Laya,<sup>1</sup> who had produced somewhat earlier (1789) a much-admired drama, of humanitarian tendency, founded on the story of the unfortunate Jean Calas. This second play of his was not of much value as a work of art, but was of intense actual interest by reason of its bold and passionate treatment of the burning question of the hour, the struggle between the two parties in the National Assembly, the Gironde and the Mountain.

The hero of the piece is a *ci-devant* noble, named Forlis. He has adhered to the revolutionary party, but is a "friend of the laws," stands for order and justice, in other words is a Girondin. He is in love with a young girl, the daughter of another nobleman, Versac, who is an honourable man, but a bitter opponent of the democratic movement. Forlis has a rival for the lady's affections in the infamous Nomophage, a sly and treacherous party-man, hiding his villainy under a hypocritical show of love of country and of the people, in fact a sort of Tartufe of patriotism. Everyone took this figure for a portrait of Robespierre. To injure his rival Nomophage has recourse to all sorts of cunning devices. Among others he has in his pay a couple of journalistic demagogues, one of whom, Duricrane, painted as a bandit possessed of only one talent, the art of inflaming the passions of the mob, is obviously a study of Marat. These two journalists have got hold of a list of persons to whom the generous Forlis distributes a daily pension of twenty sous apiece. This is really an innocent compassionate allowance, but the three scoundrels make out that it proves the existence of a criminal conspiracy, and Forlis, as well as Versac, is for a time in the

<sup>1</sup> Laya (1761-1833) had naturally a difficult time during the Terror, but his life thereafter was one of honour and dignity. He wrote a number of plays of consistently humanitarian colour, and ended as a Professor of Literature.

greatest danger. But virtue of course triumphs in the end; the poor folk whom Forlis has succoured appear before the tribunal and bear witness to his noble character, on which the scoundrelly demagogues receive their well-earned chastisement.

The piece, as we have said, had no real artistic value, but it contained passages written with a degree of force, or rather of violence, which, in those inflammatory times, made them act on the nerves of the public like so many detonating bombs. When the hero stepped forward and with frenzied passion declaimed against enemies of the country who were worse than those beyond the Rhine; when he made it plain on whom he meant to fit the cap, exclaiming: "These are all those juggling impostors, patriots of the market-place, who cover their antics with a solemn cloak of citizenship; preachers of equality compact of ambition; worshippers of idols, whose piety is but a whited sepulchre, nought else but hypocrisy"; when he closed his tirade in a crescendo of violence: "Let all these charlatans, these popular scoundrels, these insolent braggarts of patriotism, free this liberated soil from the sight of them! War! war! on the creators of anarchy! Ye royalist-tyrants, ye republican-tyrants, bow yourselves before the laws, see in them your sovereigns! Take shame that ye have been, take yet more shame that still ye are brigands!, now the darkness is gone, see to it that ye too vanish!"—when, to crown all, these passionate words rushed forth in resounding verse,<sup>1</sup> we need not wonder that the crowds who thronged the *Théâtre de la Nation* broke out, as if bitten by gadflies, into a frenzied hurricane of hoots and yells, part enthusiasm, part rage. The success, or at least the sensation, made by the play was almost unexampled. From early in the afternoon the

<sup>1</sup> The peroration runs as follows in the original :

Que tous ces charlatans, populaires larrons  
Et de patriotisme insolens fanfarons  
Purgent de leur aspect cette terre affranchie !  
Guerre ! guerre ! aux faiseurs d'anarchie !  
Royalistes-tyrans, tyrans-républicains,  
Tombez devant les lois ; voilà vos souverains.  
Honteux d'avoir été, plus honteux encore d'être  
Brigands, l'ombre a passé ; songez à disparaître !



streets around the *Théâtre de la Nation* were practically impassable by reason of the crowds waiting to take tickets for *l'Ami des Lois*. And at night in the theatre there was such a din of clapping and hooting, such wild excitement as had rarely before been equalled. But as the clappers were almost always in a majority, all this commotion was far from pleasing to the Jacobins and the Commune. The *Théâtre de la Nation* became in their eyes no better than a resort of *émigrés* and counter-revolutionaries, and, after half a score of tumultuous performances, *l'Ami des Lois* was prohibited.

This arbitrary prohibition aroused intense exasperation. It was held, reasonably enough, that it was absurd and intolerable that the new régime of liberty should introduce this sort of theatrical censorship, whereas the old Government had tolerated with equanimity the production of much more daring pieces. Feeling ran so high that while performances were in progress a military cordon was thrown round the *Théâtre de la Nation*, and two guns were trained on the building from the corner of the Rue de Bucy. Inside the theatre the notorious General Santerre, the brewer of the Faubourg St Antoine, took post with a strong guard, all in full uniform, to overawe the furious audiences. But the people were not to be intimidated. "Down with the Beer-General!" they shouted. "Down with the murderers of the 2nd September! Down with the robbers! We will have the play! The play or death!"

After a series of riotous scenes of this sort the Commune was forced to swallow the bitter pill, and *l'Ami des Lois* was reproduced and performed several times. But the rancour of the ruling party against the *sociétaires* was in nowise diminished by the incident, and the ancient *Comédie Française* was in effect doomed to death from this moment. The authorities were waiting only for an opportunity to take their revenge, and the opportunity was not slow in presenting itself.

On the 2nd September 1793 the *Théâtre de la Nation* produced a play, which was to all appearance incapable of offending anyone—*Paméla, ou la Vertu récompensée*,



a dramatization of Samuel Richardson's well-known and highly moral novel. As an additional precaution it had been revised and purified of all phrases smacking of the aristocratic, and it was confidently expected that it would go down without offence. But towards the end of the play there occurred a speech advocating tolerance in religious questions, and this point of view was displeasing to a fanatical citizen who happened to be present, and who leaped to his feet clamouring about aristocracy and counter-revolution. Attempts were made to hush him up, but he left the theatre in a rage, threatening to denounce the players to the Jacobin Club.

And while *Pamela* was being played to an end in peace, the enraged patriot proceeded to make good his threat. He went straight to the Jacobin Club, which was only too willing to give ear to his complaints. An energetic denunciation was drawn up and submitted to the general Council of the Commune; and on the night of the 3rd-4th September the whole company of the *Théâtre de la Nation*, actresses as well as actors,<sup>1</sup> were arrested at their homes and lodged in the prison of the Madelonette, which in those days, as we know, was practically the same thing as mounting the first step of the scaffold.

Talma and his colleagues of the *Théâtre de la République*, who were thus delivered from their most important competitors, have been accused of not having been wholly unconcerned in the persecution of the *Théâtre Français* company. The accusation was, however, quite unjust; and particularly so in the case of Talma, for there is no doubt whatever that he did all that was in his power to help and save his old colleagues. On the other hand, it is less pleasing to note the somewhat abject manner in which the *Théâtre de la République* subordinated its artistic functions and its

<sup>1</sup> Only two escaped the general fate, viz., Molé, who perhaps owed his immunity to his immense popularity and his advanced age, and the fat comedian, Desessarts, who happened, as we have seen, to be absent undergoing a cure at a watering-place, but who died in an apoplectic seizure on hearing of his colleagues' disaster. Fleury, who was one of the most deeply compromised of all the actors, and who had been marked for the guillotine, has given, in his interesting *Memoirs*, a lively and detailed description of their sojourn in the prison and of the various attempts made to rescue him and the others.



repertory to the caprices of the ruling faction. The pieces which they had the hardihood to present, or rather, perhaps, had not courage enough to refrain from presenting, were so many outrages on good taste. No doubt, however, with the sinister, trenchant censorship of the guillotine always looming in the background, the managers were more concerned to keep their heads on their shoulders than to preserve the purity of the public taste.

A good example of the sort of patriotic drama on which the *Théâtre de la République* had to subsist under the Terror, is Sylvain Maréchal's *le Jugement dernier des Rois*, described as "a Prophecy in one Act." This play was produced on the 18th October 1793—two days before the execution of Marie Antoinette. Its story, which aroused immense enthusiasm, runs as follows:

An old man, who in his youth has been the victim of the tyranny of a French king, is living forsaken on a desert island. In his solitude he has developed into a full-blown Son of Liberty, he hates kings, weeps over the sufferings of the down-trodden multitudes, and has carved in great letters on a cliff his beloved watchword: *Liberté, Égalité*. Of a sudden he sees a number of strangers landing upon the island. It is a shipment of sans-culottes from all the countries of Europe. The old man receives them with rapture, and asks what has brought them there. They explain to him that the whole of Europe has been liberated; on the impulse given by France, every country has now become a Republic. A deputation composed of one sans-culotte from each country has been charged with the duty of transporting all the crowned tyrants to a desert island. "You shall see them all immediately," says one of the sans-culottes, "all but one, whom France has disposed of already." On this all the monarchs advance in a row, and the sans-culotte gives an illuminating description of each in turn, somewhat in the style of the showman of a menagerie: here we have the King of England, the King of Prussia, the Emperor Francis, the King of Spain, fat King Stanislas of Poland, the Empress of Russia, nicknamed "the Harlot of the North"—last of all, here is Pope Pius the Sixth. After



having overwhelmed all the unfortunate Supreme Heads of States with the most appalling terms of abuse, the sans-culottes and the old Friend of Equality depart from the island, leaving the tyrants to their fate, not, however, till they have pointed out to them that they are standing on a volcano. The 'Prophecy' closes with a grotesque scene of farce in which all the monarchs fall to fighting over a barrel of biscuits, and the Empress Catherine, determined to secure the lion's share, hits Pope Pius over the head with her sceptre. Then of a sudden the earth trembles, the volcano vomits forth its glowing lava, and the crowned heads perish in a holocaust of terror as the curtain falls.

The lot of the old *sociétaires* almost strikes us in comparison as an enviable one, in that they were able to sit quietly in prison, instead of having to entertain the mob with grotesque horrors of this sort. Otherwise, however, their position was by no means to be envied. It was the fixed and serious intention of the Committee of Public Safety to send six of them—Fleury and Dazincourt, the sisters Louise and Emilie Contat, Mlle. Raucourt and Mlle. Lange—to the guillotine, and to deport the others. Their worst enemy was a member of their own craft, the notorious Collot d'Herbois, who, before coming into prominence as one of the most dreaded butchers of the Terror, had travelled about France and the adjoining countries as an exceedingly bad actor and dramatist. The bills of indictment were duly prepared and sent to the public prosecutor, furnished, in the case of the six chief victims, with the fatal red-ink G in the margin, and accompanied by the following communication from their former colleague :

"Citizen! The Committee sends you herewith the documents relating to the *ci-devant* actors of the *Théâtre Français*. Equally with all other patriots, you are aware how intensely anti-revolutionary these persons are. You are to produce them before the tribunal on the 13th Messidor. With respect to the others, there are certain of them who have deserved only



deportation; however, we can decide what should be done with the others when sentence has been passed in these cases.

“COLLOT D'HERBOIS.”

Thus the 13th Messidor was fixed as the date for the execution of these once so popular favourites of the public, and it was only by reason of a most romantic turn of fortune that the crowds who flocked on that day to see the beautiful ladies' and elegant gentlemen's heads fall, had for once to return home disappointed.

One of the employés under the Committee of Public Safety was a young man, Charles Hippolyte de Labussière, whose name has been made familiar to the reading public<sup>1</sup> by the fine poem dedicated to his memory by a Danish author. This young man, who had himself made some attempts at acting, and who was a passionate lover of the theatre, was firmly resolved to save the doomed actors. The bills of indictment were deposited in the office where he was employed. Amid many risks, and not without thrilling hair-breadth 'scapes, he managed to gain possession of them, and, taking them home, went with them the next morning to a bathing establishment, where he thoroughly soaked the papers, so that every trace of writing was washed out, and tore and rolled up the dripping mass of paper into small balls, which he threw out of the window.

When the appointed day came, the indictments were nowhere to be found, and though in those days not many formalities were observed, it was yet necessary, before condemning anyone to death, to have the indictment against him read out publicly. Grave suspicion fell on Charles de Labussière, but he succeeded in throwing dust in the eyes of the Committee of Public Safety. Orders were issued for the preparation of new bills of indictment, but, before they were ready, the 9th Thermidor had come and gone, the Reign of Terror was over, and all the players were set at liberty.

But even though heads were now no longer at stake, the theatres continued to be subject to a species of demo-

<sup>1</sup> In Denmark.



cratic tyranny which made the conditions under which they worked intolerable, and was fatal to every attempt at artistic production. Everything was subordinated to politics and the display of popular power. A decree of the 12th Germinal An II. (1st April 1794) had abolished the Ministers and in their place established twelve Commissions, and of these the Commission of Public Instruction had special charge of the theatres. This Commission, on the 2nd Floreal An II. (14th May 1794), re-established the Censorship, which now controlled not only new pieces but also the whole of the old repertory. In consequence a large number of plays belonging to the classic repertory, among them *Phèdre*, *Andromaque*, *Britannicus*, *Bajazet* and *Le Malade Imaginaire*, were altogether prohibited; while the most absurd alterations were made in *Tartufe*, *le Misanthrope* and *le Cid*. Indeed the whole classic drama of the age of Louis XIV. was on the black list, particularly Molière, whose pieces were declared to be one and all 'bad.' Other regulations issued at this time were ludicrous to the last degree, as, for example, the following communication addressed to the managers of all the theatres on the 26th April 1794:

"We expressly enjoin upon you, citizens, in the name of the law, and on your own personal responsibility, to expunge immediately from all the pieces produced by you, whether in verse or in prose, the titles: *Duke*, *Baron*, *Marquis*, *Count*, *Monsieur*, *Madame* and all other prohibited qualifications, since these feudal titles are derived from a source so impure that they cannot be permitted any longer to pollute the French stage."

It was, indeed, far from being the intention of the Republican rulers to ruin the theatre or extirpate dramatic art. On the contrary, they took the greatest interest in it, and regarded it as an exceedingly important instrument for the instruction of the people and for political propaganda. But in order that it should fulfil these functions its activities must be properly directed—and the proper direction for its activities was the democratic direction. No one asked whether the plays produced were good or bad, if only they gave utterance to ideas "tending



to the public weal"; whether they were well or badly acted was inessential, so long as the players were known to be good democrats. Provided that the play and the players fulfilled these conditions, the theatre was a much better means of education for the people than the Christian Church had been. On the 25th December 1793, "Les Amis de la Liberté et de l'Egalité" (*i.e.* the Jacobin Club) write to the Committee on Public Instruction of the National Convention:

"... The National Convention should be called upon to direct that there shall in every town of 4000 inhabitants be established a theatre-hall, where the pupils of the Public Schools and other persons can practise the dramatic art; but where only plays of sentiment (*pièces sentimentales*) and such as breathe the spirit of the Revolution shall be performed. . . . As there are unoccupied churches in nearly all these towns it will not be necessary to provide new buildings. . . . I am confident that nothing would be better calculated to educate the people, to make them forget the fooleries of the priests, and in short to reëstablish public morals."

The theatres had to obey blindly all the absurd regulations issued by the authorities, and were subjected to a tyranny a hundred times worse than that of the *Ancien Régime*. The result was an administrative, artistic and economic chaos, in which it is impossible to discover anything solid to take hold of, or any idea beyond the single one that the theatre existed merely to obey the swiftly changing caprices of the populace. The repertory consisted of patriotic and revolutionary *pièces d'occasion*, written and produced in a break-neck hurry. The actors were transformed into agitators, singers of popular songs, mouthpieces for patriotic declamation, who, with tri-coloured cockades adorning their breasts and Phrygian caps on their heads, proclaimed an evangel of liberty they themselves, with good reason, had ceased to believe in.

Soon both sections of the old *Comédie Française*, the conservative and the revolutionary alike, were reduced to a ruinous state of confusion; till at last the good idea

occurred to them that it would be well to sink the contentious matters, political and artistic, which had divided them, and reunite their forces. In 1799, the year in which Napoleon assumed the direction of the government as First Consul, but without any direct intervention on his part, the two parties were finally reunited (31st May), establishing themselves in the theatre in the Rue Richelieu adjoining the Palais Royal, where their successors still are—and a new era began.



## THE EMPIRE

### I

Napoleon and Dramatic Art—Talma's development—Geoffroy's criticism—Talma's relation to Romanticism—Napoleon and Talma.

THE building in which the reunited *Comédie Française* now began its new career was the same which Talma and the other seceders had occupied at the time of the disruption, and has continued ever since to house the *Théâtre Français*. It had been built in 1790 by Moreau, an excellent architect, who was also the designer of the Bordeaux Theatre, at that time so greatly admired. It was beyond comparison the handsomest and most splendid playhouse in Paris.

But it was not to the merits of the playhouse that the brilliancy of the period now dawning on the ancient *Comédie Française* was due; nor to the emergence of new talent in acting, for the company was in all essentials the same as before the split; still less to any special excellence in the dramatic art of the new age, for its dramatic authors were if possible even weaker than those of the preceding period.

The strong hand by which the *Théâtre Français* was raised again to dignity and honour was the same which rescued the whole realm of France from the chaotic confusion of the Revolution. Napoleon, it is true, took no special interest in theatrical art, or, indeed, in any of the arts—his temperament was very far from being an artistic one. But he saw in the theatre an instrument by which the glory of France, and with it his own glory, could be enhanced; he saw that out of the great memories and traditions of French theatrical art a national institution could be organized which would do honour to his Government in the eyes of history, and which might also be used for his own personal glorification. He determined,

therefore, that the affairs of the theatre must be set in order; and, with his miraculous genius for administration, he succeeded in a very short time in bringing them into a state of order the like of which the ancient society had hardly known before in all its long artistic life. The laws and regulations which to this day govern the *Théâtre Français* are in all essentials the same as those prescribed by Napoleon, whether as First Consul or as Emperor. The elaborate fundamental law itself, which determines in the minutest detail the relations of the State to the National Theatre, the internal relations of the *sociétaires*, the numbers of pupils in training, the periods for débuts, the salaries of the teachers etc., was signed and issued by Napoleon during the fatal Russian campaign of 1812, at his headquarters amidst the burning ruins of Moscow, where he lay with the sorrowful remnants of the Grand Army—at one of the gloomiest and most arduous moments of his whole career, that is, when it might seem that he must have been fully occupied by quite other things than the internal arrangements of the *Théâtre Français* and the relations of the dramatic pupils to the *Conservatoire*. These regulations, which have outlived more dynasties than one, and survived more than one revolution, are still known as *le décret de Moscou*, and bear date: "Imperial Headquarters, Moscow, 15th October, 1812."

One thing, however, could hardly be provided for by official decree—dramatic poetry. Money was not the difficulty. The *Théâtre Français*, which had received a subvention of 12,000 frs. under the Monarchy, and nothing under the Revolution, was at once granted a subsidy of 100,000 frs. a year by Napoleon. The individual players, too, were generously treated by him; Talma, who had extravagant tastes and lived far beyond his means, benefiting as much as any. Napoleon paid his debts several times, and granted him a monthly allowance of 2000 frs. in addition to his income from the theatre and to his share of the very large gratifications received by the company for performances at Court. This munificence at any rate did the players no harm.



But dramatic art! It was Napoleon's ambition to have his own tragic poet, as Louis XIV. had his Racine. He cared very little about comedy. It was no simple matter to wring a smile from him. Talleyrand used always to pity M. de Rémusat, the Chief Director of Entertainments at the Imperial Court (who held charge of the theatres as well), because it was his task to find amusement for 'cet homme inamusable.'

It cannot be said, however, that the great ruler's partiality for tragedy fostered the development of dramatic poetry. Seldom, if ever, has there been any period in France so destitute of good plays as the reign of Napoleon. It is doubtful if the names of such dramatists as Baour-Lormian, Aignan, de Jouy, Brifaut, Picard, or Alexandre Duval are remembered by anyone but specialists in the history of the drama; and in any case such recollections as they may call up do not include that of a single good play, read or seen on the stage.<sup>1</sup>

Napoleon's eager search for a tragic poet became a sort of standing jest. Alex. Dumas writes in his *Memoirs*: "Year by year he demanded his 300,000 recruits of the Minister of War, and his poet from the *grand maître* of the University. He thought at one time that he had found his poet in M. Raynouard. Unfortunately M. Raynouard was much occupied during the week" (he was an eminent philologist) "and could only devote himself to poetry on Sundays. The result of this preoccupation was that M. Raynouard could only find time to write three tragedies: *les Templiers*, of which we have already spoken, *les Etats de Blois*, which was not nearly so good as *les Templiers*, and *Caton d'Utique*, which was not nearly so good as *les Etats de Blois*."

"Napoleon was in despair! But he went on demanding his 300,000 recruits and his poet."

"In 1808, after he had reigned for four years, he

<sup>1</sup> Alexandre Duval (1767-1842) wrote, it is true, a number of popular light comedies, and also some successful tragedies; but all, and especially the tragedies, were second-hand and unimportant works. François Marie Raynouard's tragedy *les Templiers* was also very successful in its time, but was soon forgotten.

had M. Raynouard and M. Baour-Lormian, the author of *les Templiers* and the author of *Omasis*.

"This worked out at half a poet a year. At this rate, if he had reigned fourteen years, he would have attained to another Pleiad."<sup>1</sup>

With the art of acting things went better, even as regards tragedy. In the first place Talma, now that he could devote himself in peace to his work, developed into a really great actor. He was now a man of mature age—when Napoleon was crowned as Emperor, Talma was forty years old. By that time he had been twice married. In 1791 he had married Julie Careau, a lady somewhat older than himself, who brought him in dowry a considerable fortune, which enabled him to live in the lavish style that suited him, and even to maintain a much-frequented political salon, after the fashion so much in vogue in the Revolution period. The first Mme. Talma was a charming and talented lady, but in the long run the couple proved unsuited to each other, and the marriage was dissolved. The passing of the new law of divorce enabled him to marry again in 1802, his second wife being Charlotte Vanhove, daughter of the old actor. The lady, like Talma, had been divorced, the name of her first husband having been Petit. She was herself an actress, but though capable and much esteemed, she never attained to her husband's level.

Talma's art had matured with his ripening age. His hatred of turgid declamation and unnaturalness was as strong as ever, and he had succeeded in working out a style of diction of his own, which, avoiding the absurdity and deadly monotony of the old-fashioned method of delivery, brought the alexandrine as near as the form admitted to being a credible and natural vehicle for human emotions. Essentially, indeed, Talma was a naturalistic actor, endowed with an exceptionally developed sensibility. The long tirades of the classic tragedy, however subtle their thought might be and however beautiful their verse, were wearisome to him, and his delivery of them was apt to be sing-song and monotonous. But into scenes of strong

<sup>1</sup> Alexandre Dumas: *Mes Mémoires*, iv. 3 seq.



feeling he would throw himself with passionate intensity, rendering them with an almost pathological realism, which sometimes overstepped the bounds of beauty, at least to the taste of old-fashioned critics, but which was always impressive through its truth to nature, and always, at the moment, thrilled the spectators, whether old or young, and roused them to enthusiasm.

Geoffroy, an acute though venal and malicious critic of the old school, writes in 1805 of his *Orestes*<sup>1</sup>:

"Talma's rendering of the frenzy of *Orestes* always evokes the liveliest applause. He plays the scene with an appalling truth to nature, which cannot but powerfully affect the multitude. Lekain's<sup>2</sup> method was different: penetrated by the nobility of his art, he held that *Orestes* must preserve a certain dignity, even in his moments of madness. According to his view the intonations of voice, the gestures and facial expression of a tragic hero whose mind is unhinged by the excess of passion and calamity, must be other than those of a madman from the Charenton Asylum. He did not consider that *Orestes*' frenzy should resemble an attack of epilepsy. Accordingly Lekain strove to ennoble this madness of a prince devoted by a terrible fate to the *Eumenides*.

"Talma employs a different method; he is more real and true to nature, but less noble, indeed less interesting. He represents with great accuracy an unhappy human being who has gone out of his mind; he reproduces with great truth all the symptoms of common madness; he amazes, he appals. But Lekain was more touching, more pathetic.

"The success of Talma's method gives him good grounds for not altering it. But it does not give criticism grounds for approving it. Lekain's method was not only more difficult to understand, it was also much more in accordance with the rules of art and with the spirit of Tragedy, whose aim it is to represent, not physical infirmities, but feelings and passions."

<sup>1</sup> In Voltaire's tragedy of the same name.

<sup>2</sup> For Lekain, see vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), pp. 281-292.

Geoffroy is unjust to Talma and has no understanding of the cravings and demands of the new time. But there was perhaps some justification for his remarks, for there must have been a striking inconsistency between Talma's highly sensitive talent, with its striving after naturalism, and the repertory which furnished his material—the old classical repertory, hidebound by rules and ever aiming at 'noblesse.' New wine should not be poured into old bottles. But Talma had no new bottles fit for his new, strong wine to ferment in. If he had come into the world five and twenty years later he would have found in the plays of the romantic school material precisely suited to his powers. His instinct for dwelling on the night-side of human nature, his peculiar power of portraying the terrible, the appalling, his feeling for the picturesque in scenic art and for historical costume—all these qualities were in complete accord with the ideals of Romanticism. The pity was that Romanticism had not yet emerged in France, otherwise Talma would undoubtedly have been its most inspired interpreter. As it was he had to be content with the weak, emasculated remnants of Shakespeare which had survived in Ducis' adaptations—and even these weak remnants were too strong for critics trained in classicism. In a notice of Ducis' *Othello*, Geoffroy writes (1803): "It seems as if Talma had made the horrifying, shudder-provoking *genre* peculiarly his own. His triumph lies in the portrayal of passion worked up to delirium, to insanity. He is a chief and leader of the company of lovers of gloom, like Ducis, who is his father, just as Voltaire was Lekain's. Indeed there is much the same difference between the two actors as there is between the two authors. The gloomy *genre* is bad in itself, because plays of horror are not suited to French audiences; they should be left to the population of London. . . . It is undeniable that at times . . . by going quite beyond the natural compass of the voice, Talma hits upon extraordinary intonations, that produce a shudder of fear; but these happy hits are so infrequent and their effect so transitory, that he would do well to return again within the boundaries of art; he would please us much more frequently, instead of amazing us now and then."



Geoffroy's criticism was consciously and intentionally unsympathetic, but, from his point of view, that of a critic dating from far back in the *Ancien Régime*, it was far from undiscerning,<sup>1</sup> and at all events it had ability and was based on expert knowledge. If we compare it with the enthusiastic appreciations of Talma by the young and rising lights of Romanticism, we obtain a very clear idea of the nature of his talent.

Alexandre Dumas, for example, when a very young man, describes him as Regulus (in Lucien Arnault's tragedy) in the following terms :

"My mind was full of his Sylla.<sup>2</sup> I saw the gloomy Dictator enter, with the crown surmounting his short, straight-falling hair,<sup>3</sup> his brow furrowed with cares ; his speech was deliberate, almost solemn ; his glance—it might have been the glance of a lynx or a hyæna—was half-hidden under the blinking eyelids, as in those night-prowling beasts that see in the dark.

"This was how I expected to see Talma now.

"He entered with rapid step, with head held high, curt and laconic in his speech, as befits the leader of the army of a free people and a conquering nation ; he entered, in short, as Regulus should enter. No toga, no purple, no crown ; a simple tunic belted with iron, and no mantle other than the common cloak of a warrior.

"What was admirable in Talma was that, by means of his personality, which always was the personality of the hero he was to represent, he could conjure up around him another world, could recreate an epoch."

The first champion of Romanticism in Danish literature, the youthful Oehlenschläger, who, it is well known, felt a special abhorrence both for French tragedy and for French

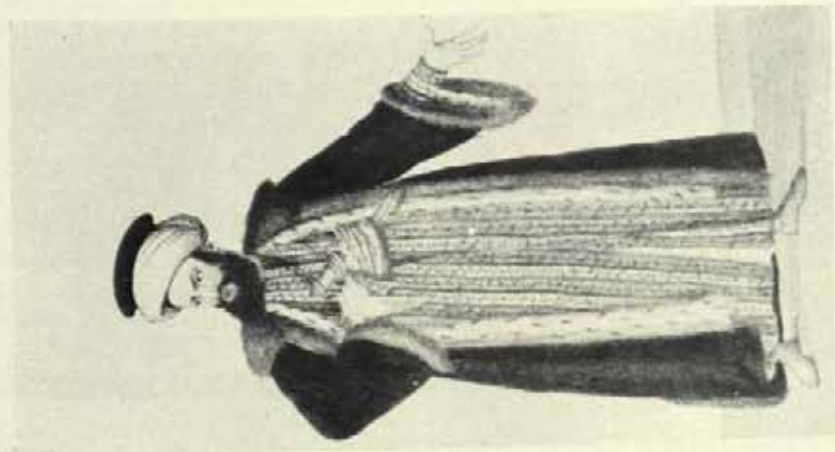
<sup>1</sup> Talma, however, was so irritated by the constant attacks on his playing and his ideas, that he was goaded into attempting to horse-whip his critic. After this Geoffroy never mentioned him at all. Abbé Geoffroy (1743-1814) was a clever man and an able critic, but he was a person of unsavoury reputation, who had been shown to have taken bribes from actors and authors. His criticisms appeared in the *Journal des Débats*.

<sup>2</sup> In de Jouy's tragedy of the same name.

<sup>3</sup> It was in this part that Talma caused a great scandal and brought the censorship down on him by making himself up to resemble Napoleon. De Jouy's tragedy was first produced in 1821, under the Restoration.



42.—Talma as Hamlet  
[in Ducis' Tragedy] (p. 169).



43.—Talma as Mohammed II.



44.—Talma as Nero.  
(p. 171)





tragic acting, was obliged nevertheless to bow to Talma's genius. In his *Journey* he writes :

"Some time ago, when *Andromaque*<sup>1</sup> was put on, I thought I would try my luck once again ; but it was too bitter a pill. I could not endure the frantic squallings, amidst which, in the most unnatural fashion, a cold intrigue crawled on, as it were shrieking itself forward. I went away. In the last scene . . . I came back to see Talma rave ; and I must confess, he really did rave. This is saying a great deal. For the others only pretend to rave.

"My barber, a born connoisseur in art (as are all Frenchmen), assured me next day, while he was working up a lather, that Talma's exertions are often so violent that they leave him without a dry stitch on his body, and even, at times, with his *boots* full of water. I was all the more surprised at this, because I have hardly ever seen him in boots—but nearly always in sandals. No doubt, however, it is in *Hamlet*, and other half-boot pieces adapted for the French stage, that this occurs. For the rest, Talma has certainly a very remarkable genius for tragedy ; he was brought up in England, and would no doubt have played Shakespearean tragedy magnificently, if Fate had granted him the opportunity."<sup>2</sup>

In his *Reminiscences* he goes into the question of Talma's acting somewhat more closely and more seriously :

"I have told you how much I admired Talma in tragedy. Though I was unable to acquire a taste for French tragedy, finding it altogether too monotonous, too conventionally 'noble,' too wanting in character and substance, yet he forced me to recognize that it has many great beauties.

"But there was one thing in his acting which never pleased me. Often after he had played a scene excellently, towards the end of the great exit speech he would raise his voice to an affected, exaggerated pitch, and shake his outstretched hands in the air, thereby eliciting immense applause from the audience. In conversing with one of

<sup>1</sup> Racine's famous tragedy.

<sup>2</sup> Oehlenschläger : *A Journey told in letters home*, i. 153 seq.



my acquaintances who was also an acquaintance of Talma's, I said: 'If I could talk to Talma, I would speak plainly to him about this matter.'—'There would be no need,' said my friend, 'Talma knows it himself quite well.' 'What has he to say about it then?' 'He says: "It is a fault; but I've had to get my countrymen to accept so much nature that they're unused to; I must make *some* concession to their customs and prejudices; otherwise I should lose the affection and enthusiasm they feel for me, and without these I could not practise my art?"' <sup>1</sup>

There was a flaw, a discord, in Talma's artistic destiny, due to the want of harmony between his powers and aspirations and the material he had to work in, the school of dramatic art to the interpretation of which he was tied down. He himself was the first to feel this discord, indeed at the time he was perhaps the only one who felt it. He expressed his feeling clearly enough in the talk he had, shortly before his death, with the young Victor Hugo, in the course of which he exclaimed: "No one knows what I might have become, if I had found the dramatist I sought for." <sup>2</sup>

What he did become, even as things were, was no little thing. He became the most distinguished representative of the classic drama, the only tragic, one may say the only poetic, genius of the unpoetical Empire period; his sonorous name still rings in our ears, when the names of his fellows are forgotten, calling up, like a fanfare of trumpets, memories of that legendary Court, and of the legendary Court entertainments at which Napoleon provided him with a 'parterre of Kings' to play to. Yet that name, Talma, remains associated for all time with the Roman toga and the Greek cothurnus, with the pseudo-classic alexandrines of the Empire and Ducis' wretched perversions of Shakespeare; while its owner would probably have much preferred a less magnificent, but deeper and truer, artistic life, in communion with poets who understood him and whose aims in theatrical art were the same as his.

<sup>1</sup> Oehlenschläger's *Reminiscences*, ii. 117.

<sup>2</sup> See above, p. 103.

Outwardly, indeed, his career was as brilliant as heart could desire ; this being due, however, not solely to his rare talent, but also in part to his peculiar relation to Napoleon. The acquaintanceship between the young artillery officer and the young actor had persisted, and become, in fact, so intimate that it might almost have been called friendship, if real friendship with Napoleon had been possible. At one time, indeed, General Buonaparte lived in Talma's house.<sup>1</sup>

When Napoleon became Emperor, Talma did not at first present himself at the Imperial Palace, holding aloof from a natural fear of finding himself in a false position. But Napoleon intimated to him that he would always be welcome at his breakfast-table, where he was fond of meeting and conversing with people for whom he had a liking. On the occasion of one of the first of these breakfasts—it was at Saint-Cloud, the seat of the new Court—it happened that a number of dignitaries and deputations, come to congratulate the First Consul on his elevation to the Imperial throne, had been directed to attend immediately after the meal. But Napoleon had started a discussion with Talma about the style of acting proper to tragedy, and this, it seemed, so engrossed him, that every time a new deputation was announced and Talma was preparing to withdraw, he merely said : “Very good ! they can wait in the throne-room. Let us go on.”

The conversation turned on Talma's playing in the part of Nero (in Racine's *Britannicus*). Napoleon was not altogether satisfied with it, though it was generally considered one of Talma's very best performances. “I should like it better,” he said, “if you could indicate more clearly in your playing the struggle between an evil nature and a good education. I could wish, too, that you would be more sparing of movement and gesture. Natures like Nero's do not betray themselves so much externally. They are more concentrated.—However, I cannot sufficiently applaud the simple and natural style

<sup>1</sup> Or, more correctly speaking, in one of the houses which his first wife had brought him in her dowry.



you have introduced in tragedy. Highly-placed personages—whether they owe their positions to birth or to their own talents—no doubt raise their voices somewhat in passionate excitement or when they give themselves up to grave thoughts, but even so, their speech should not become any less genuine or natural." "For example," he added, with a sudden change of key, "you and I are talking at this moment precisely as people talk in ordinary conversation; *eh bien ! nous faisons de l'histoire !*"<sup>1</sup>

Napoleon frequently criticized Talma's performances in this fashion, especially when the persons represented were historical figures whom he had studied, and in whom he was able to discover points of resemblance to himself. In such cases he was capable of giving the actor valuable hints, characteristic alike of the historic personage and of himself. Thus, speaking on one occasion of Talma's performance of Julius Cæsar in Corneille's tragedy *Pompée*, he said to the actor: "When Cæsar delivers that long tirade against kings, beginning:

*Connaissez-vous César de lui parler ainsi ?  
Que m'offrirait de pis la fortune ennemie,  
À moi qui tiens le Trône égal à l'infamie !*

he does not mean a word of what he is saying; he only speaks in this way because he is standing in the presence of the Romans with him, and it is to his interest to convince them that he regards this throne, to ascend which is his keenest desire, as a despicable thing.<sup>2</sup> It is important, therefore, that he should not be represented as speaking his own real convictions, and the actor should be careful to indicate that he does not. I should add, however, that this is an exceedingly difficult thing to do. For the Romans in Cæsar's train are to be deceived as to his feelings and intentions, but the spectators must not be deceived."

Such a conception of Corneille's Cæsar was altogether new to the French stage, and indicates clearly how sure and penetrating was Napoleon's insight into the historico-

<sup>1</sup> Regnault-Warin: *Mémoires hist. et crit. sur F.-J. Talma*, p. 498 *seq.*

<sup>2</sup> Ptolemy has said to Cæsar: "*Seigneur ! montez au trône et commandez ici*," and it is to this invitation that Cæsar replies as above.—Corneille: *Pompée*, iii. 3.

psychological problems of the actor's art.<sup>1</sup> Talma at once adopted the Emperor's view of the part, and his remarkable gift for the portrayal of the complexities of human character enabled him to overcome with ease the difficulty pointed out by Napoleon. That he had thus been able to inspire Talma to an entirely new reading of character in this old, familiar piece, was extremely flattering to the Emperor's vanity, and he praised his favourite actor to the skies for his performance, declaring that he had now seen Cæsar for the first time.

For the favour shown by Napoleon to the *Comédie Française* the theatre was mainly indebted to Talma. Among other tokens of this favour was the practice so much affected by the Emperor, a practice which appears almost to have formed a part of his plans of campaign, of bringing the whole company from Paris to the place where his headquarters were fixed for the time being, to play before the officers of the army and the allied princes of the neighbourhood. The players were always more than willing to obey such a summons. It gave them a chance to see the world; their travelling expenses were amply provided for; and their zeal was rewarded by exceedingly handsome presents.<sup>2</sup>

As early as the days of the Egyptian campaign, General Buonaparte had brought over from France both a theatrical company and a troupe of dancers to keep up the spirits of his army. And, later, it was a common occurrence for the *Théâtre Français* itself to receive orders to start at a moment's notice for this or that foreign or provincial city where the Emperor happened to be. They would find themselves now at Mainz, again at Erfurt, now at Compiègne, again at Fontainebleau, yet again at Dresden. It gratified Napoleon to provide his famous 'parterre of Kings' for his favourite actors to play to, and he was also anxious to show off to the foreign monarchs 'the glory of France,' as he called the *Comédie Française*.

<sup>1</sup> It indicates also, not less clearly, what Buonaparte's real thoughts and feelings were when, with a display of abhorrence not less marked than Cæsar's, he refused the kingship and all its attributes.

<sup>2</sup> Thus Talma received 10,000 francs; and Mlle. Mars and Fleury each the same amount; besides a grant of 3000 francs apiece for travelling expenses.



## II

Talma as teacher—The ugly and the beautiful 'leading lady': Mlle. Duchesnois and Mlle. George—Mlle. Mars: her art and her character.

TALMA cannot be said to have formed a school. In contrast to John Philip Kemble with his numerous relations and adherents, he stood practically alone. His artistic method involved a complete breach with the old-fashioned, pre-revolutionary traditions, but he was at the same time a prophet, a harbinger of the dawn of Romanticism, a personality peculiar and apart, who might be imitated, but was ill fitted to train up disciples, because his theory was in so many respects in conflict with his practice.

A teacher he was, nevertheless, and much beloved as such; doubtless winning his pupils' affection rather by his great amiability than by any special efficiency. Indeed he took his duties at the *Conservatoire* very lightly, oftener than not failing to attend, sometimes because he forgot the times fixed for lessons, sometimes because he was not in the vein. But when he did appear, and when there was something on the tapis that happened to interest him, he would often keep his pupils at it for hours together, working till both he and they were worn out; more, however, by way of showing them how *he* would do the thing and getting them to imitate him, than by explaining *why* it should be done so and not otherwise.

Samson,<sup>1</sup> himself in later days so famous as a teacher of acting, who was at this time a pupil at the *Conservatoire*, has given in his *Mémoires* an amusing and attractive sketch of Talma's lessons. He doubtless witnessed them as onlooker, not as pupil, since, being in training as a comedian, he would not belong to Talma's class. One of his lessons is thus described:

"One day he was giving Raymond, his best pupil and a special favourite, a lesson in the part of Séide in

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Isidore Samson (1793-1871), for many years a most highly-esteemed comedian at the *Théâtre Français*. He trained among others Rachel, Mme. Arnould Plessy, Mlle. Favart and the sisters Augustine and Madeleine Brohan. He himself became a pupil at the *Conservatoire* in 1810. His *Memoirs* were published by his daughter in 1882.

*Mahomet.* They had come to the passage where the young fanatic has just murdered Zopire, and, on the point of collapse owing to the terror inspired by his crime, falls down, exclaiming :

"Je sens que mes genoux s'affaissent."<sup>1</sup>

When the pupil had reached this point he stopped and looked at his master.—'Go on, go on,' said Talma, 'what is the matter?'—'Oh,' replied the young man, looking imploringly at his teacher, 'I don't know how to go about this. I'm afraid of being too clumsy altogether.' 'We must try what we can do,' said the great master. With this he rose from his chair, and we redoubled our attention. Talma was exceedingly smartly dressed that day: his white necktie was tied in a particularly jaunty bow; he had on a blue coat with bright metal buttons, and over it what was called a "carrick," a sort of many-caped riding-coat, made of fine *yellow* cloth; his knee-breeches were also *yellow*, and extended down well below his knees. On his feet he wore black boots with *yellow* tops, over which hung tassels made of ribands, likewise *yellow*—in fact *yellow* was the dominant note of the whole costume. I don't remember the waistcoat. It was usual to wear the "carrick"<sup>2</sup> thrown back so that the coat could be seen, and Talma followed the fashion in this. As it was winter and our stove gave out very little heat, he had kept his "carrick" on; its weight, however, did not hamper him in the least. He did not often appear at the classes in such elegant garb, and we whispered to each other: 'The great tragedian is out for adventure!'

"Talma, then, rose and went across to the stage, where Raymond was standing, but did not go up on to it. He gave Raymond various directions, and explained to him how to prepare for his fall. He then looked at the old mattress, which lay about in the class-room, and,

<sup>1</sup> Voltaire: *le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophète*, iv. 4.

<sup>2</sup> So far as I know, there is no such word as 'carrick' in English, to denote an article of clothing. But the many-caped riding-coat, which was a very typical garment under the Empire, was no doubt of English origin. The name may have come from the little town of Carrickfergus in Ulster, where there were, and still are, cloth-mills of some importance. Another kind of cloak, affected by Talma, came to be called after him—a 'Talma.'



to the best of my belief, had never in its existence had the dust beaten out of it, and went on: 'I can't fling myself on the floor; I should make such a mess of myself; but you'll understand without that.—When Séide has committed the crime, horror of it awakes in him. In his excitement and confusion he does not see that Palmire is standing beside him, and he calls out to her. Then his frenzy is succeeded by collapse; he totters, his legs can no longer support him, he falls'—and, suiting the action to the word, Talma fell on to the mattress—then picked himself up again and proceeded to brush the dust off his clothes with his hands. But, as Raymond's attempts to imitate his instructor failed time after time, Talma began again from the beginning three times over, never omitting, however, to prelude his fall by the words: 'I won't fling myself on the floor; I should make such a mess of myself!'"<sup>1</sup>

But, though Talma founded nothing that could properly be called a school, there yet grew up around him a number of men and women of talent, worthier to play with him than the colleagues he had had to struggle with in his earlier years. This was especially the case in regard to the women.

Among his contemporaries there was one, and one only, who might have been capable of playing with him on something like equal terms, if her career had not been cut short so early. This was the young, gifted, and charming actress, Louise Desgarcins, with whom Talma, before either of them went on the stage, had been deeply in love. She made her début at about the same time as Talma (24th May, 1788), and was so successful that she was at once elected a *sociétaire*, unlike Talma, who had to wait two years. She accompanied him and the other seceders to the theatre in the Rue Richelieu, where, among other parts, she played Jane Seymour to Talma's Henry VIII. But her dramatic career proved all too short. Owing to an unhappy love-affair she attempted suicide; and though her life was saved, her mind had been permanently unhinged. She died insane.

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Samson*, pp. 81 seq.



45.—Talma in Private Life (p. 175).





But in the very beginning of the new century two actresses appeared, who were both to prove notable in the history of the French stage. They differed greatly in age—one was five and twenty at her début, the other fifteen; in appearance—one was of a sensational ugliness, the other beautiful as a statue; and in the nature of their talent—one became the chief pillar, in the feminine parts, of classic tragedy, the other the favourite heroine of the young Romanticists. The first—the elder of the two—was called Mlle. Duchesnois; the second was the beautiful Mlle. George. That is to say, it is under these names that their fame as actresses has come down to posterity: their original names were of course quite different.

Mlle. Duchesnois' real name was Catherine Joséphine Rafuin. She was born, about 1777 (the precise date is uncertain), in a small, shady village-tavern kept by her mother; her father was a travelling horse-dealer. As a girl she had worked as kitchen-maid in several public-houses of the same humble sort, and had even belonged at times to the lower ranks of a less reputable profession; it seems to have been by this latter avenue that, with the help of a friend, she obtained a footing on the stage, at last making her way to the *Théâtre Français* itself.<sup>1</sup> She was certainly not helped by her looks, for, as we have said, she was notorious for her excessive plainness. Alexandre Dumas says of her: "She was like one of those lions in *faïence* ware that people set up beside flights of steps; she had a nose, in particular, which was as broad as the snorts it emitted were powerful. . . . To make up for this, her figure was wonderful; it rivalled the Venus of Milo in symmetry. Accordingly she was particularly fond of the part of *Alzire*,<sup>2</sup> in which . . . she could display her form almost naked." But he adds further on: "In spite of this excessive ugliness . . . in spite of these snortings, Mlle. Duchesnois had a voice containing notes of such profound tenderness, such melodious sorrow, that

<sup>1</sup> Cp. Hector Fleischmann: *Une maîtresse de Napoléon* (Mlle. George), vi. 99 *seq.*

<sup>2</sup> In Voltaire's *Alzire, ou les Américains*. The scene of this play is laid in Peru, and the heroine is the daughter of an Indian Chief.



to this day most people who have seen her in Maria Stuart prefer her to Mlle. Rachel."<sup>1</sup>

Mlle. Duchesnois was one of a class of actress of which the French stage in particular offers not a few examples—the elder Mlle. Sainval, for instance, belonged to it, and also, to some extent, Mlle. Dumesnil—capable of making their vehement, passionate temperament shine through an unattractive, an ungraceful, sometimes, as in this case, an almost repulsive exterior; and whom the public greet with even greater enthusiasm than they display when a similar temperament appears in conjunction with a beautiful form, perhaps by way of proving that they are not blinded by mere external beauty.

Perhaps the enthusiasm displayed in Mlle. Duchesnois' case was somewhat exaggerated, at anyrate on the occasion of her début. When this unbeautiful child of the proletariat appeared for the first time on the boards of the *Théâtre Français*, in the part of Phèdre, her conquest of the difficult and fastidious audiences was so complete that Racine's familiar tragedy had to be repeated eight nights running, and the enthusiasm at last reached such a pitch that one of the old, stiff-necked *sociétaires* was forced, to his deep disgust, to crown the young tragédienne with laurel on the open stage.

Her success, however, was not only brilliant, but lasting. She had an inborn talent for tragedy. She had tears in her voice, grief in her eyes; her playing was a direct expression of her temperament, as it had been forged and tempered in her long youth of poverty and degradation—deep and melancholy, but at the same time passionate even to despair. It was she, before all others, who became Talma's partner on the stage, playing with him in all his chief parts during the rest of his career.

As an artist he was, of course, greatly her superior, having, in addition to the inborn tragic temperament, the power given by imaginative genius of penetrating to the inmost heart of the character to be presented, while at the same time seizing on its external characteristics—a power very seldom possessed by any woman, and which, one

<sup>1</sup> Alex. Dumas: *Mes Mémoires*, iv. 27.



46.—Mlle. Duchesnois as Alzire (p. 177).



47.—Mlle. George (p. 179).





may say, had never, up to that time, been attained by an actress. Her talent, however, fitted her to profit by his guidance, even as his fitted him to be her guide. To see these two play together was held to be an experience such as had never before been known in the world of tragedy, and such as it was thought would hardly be known again. And the public never neglected the opportunity. "When Talma and Mlle. Duchesnois play in tragedy," writes Oehlenschläger from Paris, "or Fleury and Mlle. Mars in comedy, the *Théâtre Français* is always crammed."<sup>1</sup>

With Talma's death, the star of Mlle. Duchesnois declined. She retired from the stage a few years later,<sup>2</sup> but not till, in her last years, she had experienced the cruelty of the public to its discarded favourites.

Mlle. George, in most things Duchesnois' complete antithesis, made her first appearance in the same year as her rival, only a few months later, and in the same line of parts, though not in the same rôle. The choice of début rôles in the two cases was, indeed, not a little remarkable. Mlle. Duchesnois, lean and startlingly plain as we have described her, and in her five and twentieth year, had made her début as the bewitching, love-sick Phèdre; and now this enchantingly beautiful young girl of fifteen was allotted, for the display of her powers, a mature, queenly figure of high tragedy, the Clytemnestra of Racine's *Iphigénie*. Such a choice might seem at first sight merely crazy, and yet, to all appearance, it was justified by the event.

Two circumstances may serve to explain the measure of success achieved by this experiment. In the first place Mlle. George had been tutored, or rather thoroughly drilled, by a born tragedy queen, Mlle. Raucourt; and secondly, youthful as she was, her physical development was remarkably mature for her age, while her beauty was of a strictly regular classical type, which in reality had as little correspondence with her character and temperament as her mature figure had with her years.

Marguerite Joséphine Weimer—such was her real

<sup>1</sup> Oehlenschläger: *A Journey*, i. 213.

<sup>2</sup> Talma died 19th October 1826; Mlle. Duchesnois retired in 1830. She died 8th January 1835.



name—was a child of the theatre, the daughter of a provincial manager and conductor named George Weimer,<sup>1</sup> and of his wife Marie Verteuil, who was an actress. She was, so to speak, born and brought up in the theatre, and from early youth was a junior member of her parents' humble troupe. Fortune came to her when a starring engagement brought the famous, the notorious Mlle. Raucourt to Amiens, where the theatre happened at the time to be under Weimer's management. This was in 1801, when Marguerite Joséphine was fourteen. She was cast to play with the imposing tragédienne, now past her prime,<sup>2</sup> and Mlle. Raucourt at once conceived an enthusiasm for the beautiful young girl, who reminded her of what she herself had been in the bloom of youth. She took the girl with her to Paris, trained her in less than a year, and arranged for her pupil the début at the *Théâtre Français* which caused such a stir.

The first years of her stage-career in Paris were agitated ones, for a contest immediately arose between those whose artistic enthusiasm made them partisans of Mlle. Duchesnois, and the admirers of Mlle. George's youthful, exuberant charms. This contest, which raged hotly both in the press and amongst the public, took on a quite special character when, as soon happened, politics took a hand in the game.

For it happened that the First Consul cast his eyes upon the beautiful young actress, and, in the summary and direct fashion in which he conducted all his campaigns, whether erotic or military, sent for her one fine day, and made her his mistress. The immediate result of this was that Madame Buonaparte took Mlle. Duchesnois under her protection. The diplomatic Master of the Revels, M. de Rémusat, tried his best to keep the balance true between the rival actresses. But his position was a difficult one, and he could do nothing for one or the other without calling down on himself the displeasure either of

<sup>1</sup> She took her father's Christian name as her *nom de guerre*. Both he and she spelled the name George; not Georges, as it is frequently written.

<sup>2</sup> Mlle. Raucourt, who at this time was forty-eight years old, appeared at Amiens as Dido (in Lefranc de Pompignan's tragedy, produced in 1734). Mlle. George Weimer was Elise.

the parterre or of the First Consul. True, the affair with Napoleon did not last very long, though longer than was usual with his *amours de passage*. He broke off the relation when he was about to become Emperor. But it had already given notoriety to Mlle. George's name, and contributed in a measure to her rise as an actress.<sup>1</sup> Not, however, that she was a mere beauty-actress, without talent for her profession. She developed into an exceedingly capable performer, and for some time, particularly after Mlle. Raucourt had left the French stage to take the direction of the theatre at Naples, was the chief exponent of the young heroines of the tragic repertory.

Mlle. George's career as a member of the *Théâtre Français*, however, was too short to be of great importance to the theatre. One evening in 1808, barely six years after her début, she totally disappeared, and it was afterwards learned that she had fled to Russia, with the object, apparently, of joining a new lover, the young Russian General von Benckendorff. Struck off the rolls of the *Comédie Française*, she acted for four years in the French theatre at St Petersburg, where her beauty and talent made her a great success. But when war broke out between France and Russia, and Napoleon marched on Moscow, she again took flight, this time to Stockholm; and after many vicissitudes she returned to Paris, where, on the 29th September 1813, when yet but twenty-seven years old, she resumed her old place at the *Théâtre Français*. But not for long. She had always felt a sincere and enthusiastic devotion for the Emperor, even after his breach with her. Now came his fall, and the short romantic episode of his return. During the Hundred Days, and after the Emperor's final banishment, she made no secret whatever of where her sympathies lay. Nor,

<sup>1</sup> Mme. de Rémusat, Mme. Buonaparte's companion—afterwards her lady-in-waiting—has given, in her well-known *Mémoires*, a very lively, not too discreet account of Joséphine's jealousy and the annoyance which it caused to Napoleon. And Mlle. George, on her part, in her *Reminiscences*—published only recently (1908)—has described her relations with Napoleon in an extraordinarily frank, not to say excessively intimate fashion. The pictures drawn by both ladies, but especially Mlle. George's, furnish very valuable contributions to our knowledge of the great Emperor in his relations with women.



indeed, did Talma, and still less Mlle. Mars. But these two were so deeply rooted in the favour of the public that the authorities of the new régime did not dare to interfere with them, whereas Mlle. George was harried out of her post by petty intrigues and annoyances. She left the *Théâtre Français* for good (8th May 1817), first going out into the world, to play in London, in Brussels, in the French provinces, and finally, when tired of this restless wandering existence, returning to Paris once more with new courage and a new lover, the gifted, but eccentric, flighty and untrustworthy Charles Harel, with whom she lived in informal matrimony for many years, indeed till his death. Harel had been a prefect under Napoleon, and, like Mlle. George, fell into disgrace under Louis XVIII., and was exiled from France for a time. On his return to Paris he obtained the management of a theatre, no doubt with an eye to Mlle. George's career, and in this capacity he came in time to play a very important part, more especially in bringing to the front the young poets of the new Romantic school. It was in interpreting the work of these poets, too, that Mlle. George won her chief artistic laurels. We shall have occasion to glance again at Napoleon's beautiful "Georgina,"—so he used to call her—as protagonist, on the female side, in Victor Hugo's dramas.

A star that burned with a light more tranquil, but not less brilliant or less admired, was Mlle. Mars, the idol of the Parisian public. She too was, in the argot of the French stage, an "*enfant de la balle*"—a child of the theatre. Her father was the intelligent actor Monvel,<sup>1</sup> whose real name was Boutet; her mother a handsome provincial actress, Jeanne Marguerite Salvétat. Mlle. Mars was born out of wedlock (9th February 1779), and at baptism received the name Anne Françoise Hippolyte Boutet. Like Mlle. George and so many other children of the theatre she began acting as quite a little child—at one time she played in Mme. Montansier's well-known troupe of children—but early practice in her case by no means produced such confidence and aplomb as made Mlle. George, at fifteen, capable of appearing with success

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 114-15.



48.—Mlle. Mars as Empress of Russia (p. 182).





in a great tragic part. As a beginner she was exceedingly awkward. She made her actual début in 1799, when the two factions into which the *sociétaires* had split were reunited, and she and her father joined the new *Théâtre Français*. But few can then have foreseen that she was to become the brightest jewel of the French theatre in comedy. It is true that she was handsome, that her eyes were exquisite in their gentleness, and her voice sweet; but her bearing, while prettily modest, was so bashful and reserved that it produced on the spectators the effect of icy coldness.<sup>1</sup>

Her health in early youth was not good, and this very probably affected her playing, rendering it languid and colourless. But she benefited greatly by a course of baths which she took in 1803, and it would seem that with the return of health confidence and assurance came to her, and her slumbering artistic powers awakened. From this time onward her triumph was assured. The change was opportune, for she was now twenty-four, none too young for the *ingénue* line of parts, which at this time was her only one.

It is very difficult to analyse the characteristics of a great artist whose greatness and significance are almost exclusively due to the witchery of her personality, and whose theatrical career follows so exactly, as did that of Mlle. Mars, the customary course.

She was a pupil of Mlle. Contat, and succeeded to the line of parts played by that much-admired actress. She had no conscious thought of reforming comedy as Talma had reformed tragedy. Her repertory followed the regulation stages prescribed for a French comedy actress: beginning with the very young girls, the *ingénues*, of whom Molière's Agnès is the original type, she went on next to the parts of the somewhat riper maidens, in whom the 'intelligence of love' has awakened, technically known as '*les Amoureuses*,' and finally—after Mlle. Contat's retirement—to the witty, sophisticated young women of the world—*les grandes Coquettes*. There was nothing new or unusual

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Fabien Pillet's criticism of 1801, quoted by Regnault-Warin: *Mémoires sur Talma*, p. 345, Note 1.



in this course of development. And at this point she stopped short. As we shall see hereafter, it was with the utmost reluctance that she consented to act in the dramas of the young Victor Hugo, and in her sixty-second year she was still playing, to the unqualified delight of all, the part of the twenty-year-old Célimène in *le Misanthrope*.

And yet what she made of this well-worn line of parts of the old repertory, and of the new parts created by her, which merely repeated the old, or at any rate gave her nothing more and nothing better to work on, must have been something new and unusual, since for more than a generation she bore solely sovereign sway in comedy. To see comedy during this period meant to see Mars. She ruled in this sphere as Talma did in tragedy. All witnesses tell the same tale; whether Frenchmen or foreigners, they have all fallen under the same enchantment, though they do not succeed very well in explaining wherein the enchantment lay.

Oehlenschläger writes in 1817: "An actress even greater than is Fleury as an actor, is Mlle. Mars, full of life, grace, *naïveté*, and charm; beautiful on the stage, though she is past her first youth.<sup>1</sup> When I hear her and Fleury speaking verse, they seem to me to be breathing life and spirit into the nostrils of the old alexandrines." And in another place: "It is a great pity that it is so difficult, nay, almost *impossible*, to describe the playing of a good player. Mademoiselle Mars is the idol of Paris, and she deserves it. The only other player who approaches her at all is Fleury; but he is short, almost ugly, has an indifferent voice, and would seem to be rather an excellent *copy* of the great days of the French theatre than an original genius. Mlle. Mars, on the other hand, is a true genius, combining a beautiful and distinct speaking voice with a delightful appearance. . . . There can be no question that Susanne,<sup>2</sup> as drawn by Beaumarchais, is far from being an

<sup>1</sup> Mars was thirty-eight years old when Oehlenschläger saw her. The quotation is from *A Journey*, i. 89.

<sup>2</sup> Oehlenschläger is writing about *le Mariage de Figaro*, in which Mars played Suzanne.

innocent young maiden ; she is a tricky, *experienced*, intriguing lady's-maid, who is not ashamed to enquire of Figaro, very pertly, whether his forehead is itching already with a growth of horns. But Mlle. Mars knows how to *transpose* all this in the most delightful way, and Susanne becomes, in her hands, a sweet, witty, innocent young girl."<sup>1</sup>

Johanne Luise Heiberg, who had many points of resemblance to Mlle. Mars, saw her in 1836, nineteen years after Oehlenschläger, and the great actress's judgment of a fellow-craftswoman so nearly akin to herself is very interesting. She writes: "Mlle. Mars was at this time a lady of fifty years of age, or more,<sup>2</sup> but she was playing the eighteen-year-old heroine of the comedy."<sup>3</sup> To my sharp eyes her appearance, when she first entered, was certainly not quite that of a girl of eighteen ; but what a marvellous power—thank God for it!—has a soul that has kept its youth, its freshness, and its bloom, to transfigure the body ! As she spoke her naïve, almost childish speeches, how wonderfully did not youth, the youth of the soul, shine out through that body and make it transparent ! Who could, who would wish, who would have the heart, here to distinguish between soul and body ? The one thing needful in the eyes of a good spectator—illusion—was fully attained. When I turned to Heiberg to speak of this, the tears were in his eyes. 'It stirs my heart' he said, 'to hear that matchless voice again after so many years. The tones of her voice in speaking are like pearls threaded on a string. One could learn to write French by merely hearing her speak it.' A Frenchman of the old school, with a splendid head of white hair, was in the box with us. He guessed from our looks what our thoughts must be ; his eyes rested upon us with as deep a tenderness as if he had been Mlle. Mars' own father, watching with admiring rapture the emotion his child was producing in us. And truly this is a beautiful quality in the French—their pride in and gratitude towards the persons who give them artistic

<sup>1</sup> *A Journey*, i. 160 *seq.*

<sup>2</sup> Mars was in fact nearer sixty in 1836, being in her fifty-eighth year.

<sup>3</sup> Fru Heiberg does not mention the name of the play.



delight. . . . If only we could hope to get so far some day!"<sup>1</sup>

Three years later the well-known actor Eduard Devrient—afterwards a theatrical manager and historian of the stage—writes from Paris to his wife: "I have now seen as well Mlle. Mars, the star of the *Comédie Française*, and I assure you her old accustomed splendour still outshines thousands of the newly-risen luminaries. They were playing a new comedy by Alexandre Dumas,—*Demoiselle de Belle-isle*. . . . Mlle. Mars, now sixty-two years old,<sup>2</sup> plays the young girl in this piece. Owing to her exquisite toilets her appearance in no wise disturbs the illusion, at least for those who are not sitting too near; particularly as her movements and her walk are still quite youthful. . . . She is a consummate artist, with a thorough command of the whole range of spiritual states, from the finest shades of youthful *naïveté*, the gaiety of social intercourse, and love, deep and glowing, to the vehement expression of wounded honour, womanly pride, despair, and even heroism." In another letter he says of her Elmire in *Tartufe*: "Mars played Elmire with the most beautiful womanliness of bearing, and the finest, most exquisite diction. The alexandrines fell from her lips like pearls."<sup>3</sup>

If we compare these enthusiastic descriptions by three observers, who, while differing much from each other, were yet alike in their special knowledge of theatrical matters, we obtain full confirmation of what we already knew from other sources, viz., that Mlle. Mars exercised a peculiar and irresistible fascination on all who saw her act; but they do not help us to understand in what, precisely, this fascination consisted. That she was beautiful and graceful, that her voice was charming, that the words fell from her mouth like pearls of price—all this is no sufficient explanation.

<sup>1</sup> Joh. Luise Heiberg: *A Life*, i. 344 seq.

<sup>2</sup> Fru Heiberg makes out Mars rather younger than she was. Devrient adds two years to her age. His letter is dated 3rd April 1839. Mars was then just over sixty.

<sup>3</sup> Eduard Devrient: *Letters from Paris*, pp. 90 seq. and 284.

We must presume that her peculiar power lay in her having discovered how to give scenic expression to a new feminine type, answering to the ideal of the new age; to a form of 'womanliness' that was new, in so far as it had been foreign to the tastes of the two preceding centuries. In place of the free-spoken boldness of the seventeenth century, or the prudish preciosity that contrasted with it; in place of the sly piquancy or the unashamed frivolity of the eighteenth century, she substituted new ideal figures of youthful woman answering to the tastes and desires of the new age: the young, undeveloped girl, pure as new-fallen snow, transparent as crystal-clear water, capable of saying the most ambiguous things without the least thought of evil; the young, loving woman, tender, sensitive, gentle and faithful; the coquette, roguish, graceful, gay, but never cruel or frivolous, always decorous and well-bred.

By slight, dexterous transpositions of key she brought the feminine figures of the old dramatists into harmony with her own ideal and that of her time; while the female parts in the new drama—at least those in which she appeared—fitted ready-made into her scheme of art. It was thus that Mars, or rather the stage-figure created by her, became in France—just as Fru Heiberg did in Denmark—the typical embodiment of the ideal woman—of woman, as the contemporary world wished that she should be. And to this no doubt was due the intense admiration, verging on idolatry, of which these two great artists were the object all their lives long.

In relation to Mlle. Mars herself this was an ideal figure, even, if we choose to call it so, a work of art pure and simple; but executed with such fine and sure artistic mastery that it produced the effect of absolute nature. It was this indeed that gave her art its strongest appeal: that it always affected her audiences as if it were nature itself, seeming an expression of personal character, an emanation from the artist's own pure, gentle soul. In the letter quoted above, Oehlenschläger writes further: "She" (Mlle. Mars) "is respected as much for her character as for her talent. And how, indeed, can these two ever be separated?"



## THE ROMANTIC SCHOOL

### I

Victor Hugo and Talma—*Cromwell*—Alexandre Dumas—*Hernani* on the stage—Mlle. Mars and Romanticism—The Band of Youth and the first performance of *Hernani*—The relations of the *Théâtre Français* with the Romantic School.

ROMANTICISM came late to France, much later than to the other leading countries of Europe, but when at last it made its entry, it was with banners flying and drums and trumpets sounding, with brilliant colour and the motley stir of life, with the passionate enthusiasm of youth, with wildness and violence, with bitterness and hate.

The swarm of young barbarians—so they appeared to their grave and sedate seniors—who in the years about 1830 burst their way forward, with long hair *à la* Albrecht Dürer falling on their shoulders, with enormous Rubens hats, fantastically coloured waistcoats and voluminous velvet pantaloons, were bent on turning every form of art—poetry, painting, music, drama—up-side down, and did in fact sweep aside, as with a mighty wind, the ancient, dusty, shrivelled survival of Classicism.

It was almost a matter of course that the theatre should be the stronghold around which the battle between the fiery young champions of the new in art and the stubborn defenders of the ancient ways raged most fiercely.

As we all know, the leader of the motley, poetic army of attack was the young Victor Hugo; who, however, differed not a little in externals from his turbulent associates. There was nothing in his appearance sensational or challenging, and he was quiet, self-restrained, and modest in manner. But beneath this quiet appearance and manner he concealed a profoundly passionate temperament, intense determination and self-confidence,

and an immovable faith in the pre-eminence, almost the divinity, of the poetic vocation. Even in early youth he had astonished all who knew him by his inborn poetic endowment. He had now developed, in addition, an extraordinary gift for flamboyant rhetoric, and it was accordingly not wonderful that his companions in arms, even such of them as were older than himself, looked up to him as their natural, heaven-born leader in the artistic war.

He it was, then, who drew up the programme and issued the order of the day for the attack on the ancient and hitherto sacrosanct form of tragedy, with its slavish worship of rules, and, above all, of the holy Three Unities. In 1826, when twenty-four years old, he had written a historical drama, *Cromwell*. Baron Taylor, who at that time held the office of Intendant of the Royal Theatres, was personally acquainted with Hugo—indeed the King himself, Charles X., was interested in the young poet—and, knowing of Hugo's play, the Baron invited him to dinner to meet Talma, who was the only actor to whom it seemed possible to entrust the title-rôle. Talma was at this time sixty-three years old, and was already suffering from the disease<sup>1</sup> of which he was to die soon after. But he was as enthusiastic as ever in his art, and was still constantly on the lookout for new problems in attacking which he might find scope for his longing for realism in art. The old actor and the young poet fell into earnest conference about their artistic ideals, and soon found that they were of one mind. "You are young and daring, M. Hugo," said Talma; "you ought to write a part for me. Taylor told me that you were working at a *Cromwell*. I have always wanted to play *Cromwell*. I bought a portrait of him in London. If you will come home with me, you can see it—it is hung in my room. What is your piece like? I feel sure it's not like the other dramatists' pieces."—"What you dream of playing," answered Hugo, "is just what I am dreaming of writing."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Talma died of cancer of the stomach. It was at this dinner-party that Talma expressed his dissatisfaction with the material he had had to work on throughout his career as an actor. See above, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> *Victor Hugo raconté par un témoin de sa vie*, ii. 139 seq.



Does not every artist reproduce in his art his own personal excellences and defects?" This reflection is typical of the time when it was uttered. But it in no wise corresponds with actual conditions, and in this particular case is specially wide of the mark.

Mlle. Mars' character presented a quite extraordinarily sharp contrast with the ideal womanly figure she created for the stage, a contrast so sharp as almost to be ludicrous. She could indeed be charming and amiable even off the stage—though she reserved these qualities chiefly for festive occasions—but the fact remains that her most prominent characteristic was, to put it plainly, shrewish ill-nature. She was feared and avoided for her rudeness of speech by her colleagues and even by her Director. And, what is still more remarkable, her mouth, which let fall on the stage only the loveliest pearls of speech, was capable in private life of emitting a voice of quite another tone. An old acquaintance of hers, the erudite historian A. Jal, speaks of this in the article devoted to her in his well-known Dictionary: "She had two very different voices," he says. "One—her theatre-voice—was gentle, harmonious, enchanting, attracting and captivating the hearer. The other—her private voice—was harsh, rough, abrupt. I have never been able to understand how this latter voice, which I have heard many times, could so utterly transform itself and be transmuted into the purest music."<sup>1</sup>

Of her virtue, in the more limited sense, it is hardly necessary to speak; her many love affairs are a matter of common knowledge, and while yet quite a young girl she had two children, a daughter, who died young, and a son, who survived her and inherited her large fortune. For she was an excellent woman of business, made money by speculations on the Bourse, and was not fond of parting with it. She left a fortune of 800,000 francs, besides diamonds valued at 200,000 francs.

She was most certainly far from being an ideal character, and when she died she left behind her numberless admirers, but very few friends. Her art remained in full perfection

<sup>1</sup> A. Jal: *Dictionnaire critique et historique*, Art. Mars.

to the very last, perhaps because her stage-life was a thing by itself, apart from reality, a life inspired by another soul, one might almost say lodged in another body, than her own.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mlle. Mars retired from the stage in 1841, in her sixty-second year. She died 20th March 1847.



Hugo now proceeded to develop his ideas, while the great actor, old and ill as he was, listened with approval and youthful enthusiasm. The old form of tragedy was to go. Dramas were to be written and acted in which the scene was to change, as in the Shakespearean plays, according to the requirements of the action. To the devil with the Three Unities. The style was to be sometimes serious, sometimes comic, now lyrical, now satiric. Give us human beings instead of 'rôles,' let us hear human speech instead of tirades in elegant verse. He quoted several passages to illustrate the difference between the old tragedy and the drama that was to be; among others the scene in which Cromwell questions Davenant about his journey, a scene which is carried on in quite everyday dialogue.<sup>1</sup> In the course of it Cromwell says:

*"Vous avez un chapeau de forme singulière.  
Excusez ma façon peut-être familière;  
Vous plairait-il, monsieur, le changer pour le mien?"*

This would have been unheard-of, inconceivable, in a classic tragedy, in which only the noblest reflections must be presented in the noblest verse—whereas this was just like so much prose! Talma applauded vigorously, exclaiming: "Yes, yes! that is it! That is human talk!" He seized the young poet's hand and added enthusiastically: "Make haste and finish your drama. I long to play it."

Talma was never to play in any of the dramas of the new school; before many months were out he was dead.<sup>2</sup> Hugo saw that an adequate performance of his drama was impossible with no Talma to take the chief part, and accordingly published it the year after in book form,<sup>3</sup> with

<sup>1</sup> *Cromwell*, iii, 14. The scene is, at the same time, one of strong dramatic tension, and the novelty consisted in the contrast between the everyday tone of the speeches and the tense action.

<sup>2</sup> He died on the 19th October 1826.

<sup>3</sup> In any case it could not possibly have been played in the form in which it appeared, since it was as long as two ordinary dramas, at least. Nor can it be said that Hugo followed out his programme consistently in this, or in any other of his dramas in verse. They are all full of the old-fashioned long tirades working up to an 'effective' climax, that seems designed to conjure forth applause from the remotest corners of the house. None of the French dramatists, even down to Edmond Rostand, seems to have been able to escape this besetting weakness.

a long, fiery preface, which became the accepted programme of the whole romantic school in drama.

It was not Victor Hugo, but another, who was to strike the first blow on the classic stage of the *Théâtre Français*. That honour was reserved for a much inferior poet, who was, however, one of the most zealous and enthusiastic warriors in the Romantic phalanx—Alexandre Dumas. With his historic prose drama *Henri III. et sa Cour*, he won a brilliant victory over a public taken unawares, which doubtless saw that this was something new, but detected nothing in it to offend its feeling for consecrated academic forms. For one thing the piece was in prose, so that their ears were not wounded by the use of rhymed verse as a vehicle for new ideas, for the thoughts and feelings of real life, instead of the old accustomed conventional ones. Then, it was entertaining, well-constructed and effective; it made its way easily and brilliantly, practically without a rub. And besides, it was difficult to take very seriously, as the leader of a sinister, revolutionary movement, this joyous young man with the tall, slender figure, and the engaging, rather negro-like smile; and it was quite impossible to hate him.

Things were very different the year after, when Hugo's heavy artillery moved forth to the attack.

King Charles X. had vetoed the performance of the young poet's *Marion Delorme*, while trying to sweeten the pill by increasing the pension allowed him from 2000 to 4000 francs. Hugo proudly declined the offered gratuity, and set to work with feverish haste<sup>1</sup> on the play which was to be the oriflamme of Romanticism—*Hernani*.

Around this standard the army of youth arrayed itself, thirsting for blood; around it the real battle was engaged. It began as soon as the piece had been accepted for performance, in the form of a series of small skirmishes with the players. The highly conservative company of the *Théâtre Français* was but ill-suited to the presentation of a piece of strongly-marked, richly-coloured, swelling romanticism, such as was Hugo's drama, and

<sup>1</sup> It is stated that Victor Hugo wrote *Hernani* in a week. Of course, if so, the plan of the piece must have been all ready in his head beforehand.



most of its members, moreover, were exceedingly ill-disposed to the task. In the latter respect Firmin,<sup>1</sup> the actor who played the title-rôle, was an exception, but his goodwill hardly made up for his deficiency in power. Ruy Gomez was allotted to Joanny,<sup>2</sup> an artist of much talent, the only one in the company who had something of Talma's power. He was an elderly man, and belonged to the old school; but, luckily for Hugo, he was an old soldier, had served under the poet's father, General Hugo, and was well disposed towards his old commander's son. But incomparably the most important of all the performers was Mlle. Mars, who, at fifty-one years of age, was cast for the part of Doña Sol; and she was very far from feeling any enthusiasm either for the part itself, the new school in drama, or the young poet who represented that school.

Alexandre Dumas, who attended some of the rehearsals for this memorable production, gives in his *Memoirs* a very amusing account of the annoyances to which Hugo was subjected at the hands of this idolized 'leading lady,' annoyances which he bore with the patience of an angel, but at the same time with the firmness of a man. The scenes between the two are best described in Dumas' own words:

"In the middle of the rehearsal Mlle. Mars suddenly stopped. 'Excuse me, *mon ami*,' she said to Firmin (or to Michelot,<sup>3</sup> or Joanny). 'there's a small matter I should like to speak to the author about.' The actor addressed nodded in assent, and remained standing where he was, silent and motionless.

"Mlle. Mars then advanced to the footlights, shaded her eyes with her hand, and, though she knew quite well

<sup>1</sup> Jean François Becquerel, *alias* Firmin (1787-1839), was one of the usual handsome, jaunty 'first-lovers.' He had the qualities of his 'line'—charm, liveliness, lightness of touch—the last two in a degree that unfitted him to play the heroes of romantic drama.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Baptiste Bernan Brissebard, *alias* Joanny (1775-1849). He made his début in 1797; played later at the *Odéon*, when that theatre became the 'Second Théâtre Français'; and became a *sociétaire* of the *Comédie Française* in 1825.

<sup>3</sup> Michelot played Don Carlos. He was an urbane, agreeable man of the world, a teacher at the *Conservatoire*, who hated the Romantics heartily but never let them see it.



49.—Joanny.



50.—Mlle. Mars





where the author was sitting in the parquet, seemed to be looking about for him. This, of course, was a little bit of private by-play of her own.

"'M. Hugo?' she asked. 'Is M. Hugo here?'—  
'Here I am, Madame,' said Hugo, rising from his seat.  
—'Oh yes! Thank you! . . . Will you tell me,  
M. Hugo . . .?'—'Madame?' 'I find I am to speak  
this line:

*Vous-êtes, mon lion, superbe et généreux !*

'Yes, Madame. Hernani says to you :

*Hélas ! j'aime pourtant d'une amour bien profonde !  
Ne pleure pas. . . . Mourons plutôt ! Que n'ai-je un monde,  
Je te le donnerais ! Je suis bien malheureux !*

and you answer :

*Vous êtes, mon lion, superbe et généreux !*

'Do you really like that, M. Hugo?'—'What, Madame?'—  
'This *mon lion*?'—'I wrote it, and it surely follows  
that I thought it right.'—'Ah! Then you wish to keep  
to this word, this *lion* of yours?'—'That depends upon  
circumstances, Madame. If you can find a better word,  
I shall be quite willing to substitute it.'—'It is not for  
me to find words; surely not for *me*, but for the author.'  
—'Well, Madame, in that case we had better stick to  
what I have written.'—'Yes—but—I think it sounds so  
ludicrous, to call M. Firmin *mon lion*!'—'That is because,  
while playing Doña Sol, you wish still to be Mlle. Mars.  
If you really were the ward of Ruy Gomez de Silva, that  
is, a noble maiden of sixteenth-century Castile, you would  
not see M. Firmin in Hernani; you would see one of  
those terrible robber-chiefs who made even Charles V.  
tremble in his capital. And then you would understand  
that such a woman might well call such a man *mon lion*, and  
the word would not seem to you so ludicrous.'—'Well,  
well! since you are so set upon your "*lion*," we will say  
no more about it. I'm here to speak the lines as they  
are written. . . . As *mon lion* is in the part,—well, I will  
say *mon lion*. . . . Of course, it is all the same to me! . . .  
Come along, then, Firmin!

*Vous êtes, mon lion, superbe et généreux !*



"And the rehearsal proceeded.

"But the next day, when Mlle. Mars had reached the same passage, she stopped again, and, as on the previous day, advanced to the footlights and, shading her eyes, seemed to look round for the author.

"'M. Hugo!' she said in her driest tones—in Mlle. Mars' voice, not Célimène's. 'Is M. Hugo here?'—'Here I am, Madame,' replied Hugo, as peaceably as ever. —'Ah, that is well! I am so glad that you are here.' —'Madame, I had the honour of paying my respects to you before the rehearsal.'—'Ah, to be sure. . . . Well, have you thought the matter over?'—'What matter, Madame?'—'What I spoke about yesterday.' —'Yesterday? Why—you did me the honour of speaking about so many things. . . .'—'Oh yes, very true. . . . But I meant that terrible line.'—Which line?' —'Oh, you know very well!'—'No, I assure you; you have said so many things to me that were good and to the point, that I find it difficult to distinguish between them.' —'I mean the line about the "lion." . . .'—'Oh yes! "*Vous êtes, mon lion!*" now I remember.'—'Well, have you succeeded in finding anything else?'—'I must confess, Madame, that I haven't tried.'—'You do not think the line risky?'—'What do you call risky?'—'I call a thing risky that people are likely to hiss.'—'I have never expected that people would not hiss me.'—'Well, but surely it is best to be hissed as little as possible.'—'Do you think, then, that the line about the "lion" will be hissed?'—'I am quite sure of it.'—'If so, Madame, it will be because you are not willing to speak the line with your usual accomplished art.'—'I shall speak it as well as I can. . . . But I should prefer. . . .'—'What?' —'To say something else.'—'What would you say?'—'Something else at any rate.'—'But what else?'—'I would say . . .' and Mlle. Mars seemed to search for the word that she had had ready on the tip of her tongue for the past three days—'I would say—let me see—

*Vous êtes, monseigneur, superbe et généreux!*

Does not *monseigneur* fit into the verse just as well as *mon lion*?—'Certainly, Madame, but *mon lion* gives the verse elevation, while *monseigneur* makes it flat. I would rather be hissed for a good line than applauded for a bad one.'—'Very well, very well! . . . don't let us get excited about it! . . . We will speak your "good line" as it stands, then! . . . Come along then, my dear Firmin, let us proceed:

*Vous êtes, mon lion, superbe et généreux!*'

"It is hardly necessary to add that when the night of the first performance arrived, Mlle. Mars said: '*Vous êtes, monseigneur!*' and not: '*Vous êtes, mon lion!*'"<sup>1</sup>

It must, however, be said, and it was indeed acknowledged by Hugo and everyone else, that, intolerable as Mlle. Mars had made herself at rehearsals, in the actual performance she did not betray her author; when once she stood before the public she made his cause her own, and played with all her accustomed art, so that even in this part, so far from congenial to her, she won a victory for herself and Hugo. Furthermore, her fear of possible hissing was far from being unfounded. There was battle in the air. The actors knew it, the newspapers foreshadowed it, Hugo's friends and adherents dreaded it. But he himself was not afraid. It was not ordinary success he aimed at, but simply to have his artistic creation brought before the world. To the horror of all connected with the theatre, he had declined to have the ordinary 'claque,' but in its place he had himself provided another 'claque,' of a very extraordinary kind. To all the tribe of romantic poets, to all his friends, to all who wished for the triumph of the new school—painters, musicians, sculptors, architects—he had issued a sort of passport, a flame-coloured ticket with the Spanish word *hierro* (iron) stamped upon it, and had arranged that they should be admitted to the theatre in advance of the rest of the public.

Assuredly a more remarkable crowd than that which assembled outside the doors of the *Théâtre Français* at

<sup>1</sup> Alexandre Dumas: *Mes Mémoires*, v. 271-274.



3 p.m. on the 25th February 1830—the performance began at 7 p.m.—has rarely been seen even in Paris. It was remarkable as including practically every man who was to become famous in the world of art in the coming days — Balzac, Berlioz, Théophile Gautier, Devéria, Piccini, Kreutzer, Gérard de Nerval, Célestin Nanteuil, Pétrus Borel, and a hundred others—but perhaps yet more remarkable by reason of the very singular appearance presented by these young enthusiasts. The costume of 1830—particularly men's costume—was stiff and starched to a degree; the high, stiff, white cravat, the tight black



Théophile Gautier  
in youth.

frock-coat, with its collar standing high at the back, the hair cut short behind, but brushed up into a sort of high cock's comb in the front, the tall silk hat—all contributed to produce a certain severely mercantile appearance. And now this rebellious band of youth appeared in the correct, fashionable *Théâtre Français* in the most remarkable fancy costumes—rustling in silks, glowing in velvet and furs, with headgear of all countries and all ages, Florentine toques, felt hats à la Rubens, Rembrandtesque barettas, all planted on flowing manes of hair—black, brown, red or yellow.

Théophile Gautier, then a very young,<sup>1</sup> but a very quiet and serious man, seems to have been the worst of all. His costume on this occasion has in fact become historic, and at the time came near to dividing the public interest with Hugo's play. He wore a black spencer,<sup>2</sup> with velvet facings, pearl-grey pantaloons with broad black-velvet stripes, and, worst of all, a brilliant scarlet silk waistcoat, specially calculated to be an eyesore to the black-and-white-clad Philistines. On his feet he had yellow leather shoes, and on his head an immense, high-crowned, broad-brimmed sombrero. It was his usual

<sup>1</sup> He was just over nineteen years old.

<sup>2</sup> "Spencer—(named after Earl Spencer 1782-1845)—a man's outer garment or over-coat, so short that the skirts of the body-coat worn under it were seen." *Century Dictionary* (trans. note).

practice to go bareheaded, and indeed his head was quite sufficiently protected by his beautiful chestnut-brown hair, which came down literally to his waist and formed an admirable setting for his pale, clear-complexioned face, out of which the black eyes shone with a tranquil lustre, altogether careless of the sensation caused by their owner's appearance.

At a later day, when his hair was somewhat shorter, but his romantic enthusiasm otherwise undiminished, Gautier defended his comrades and himself, in a somewhat apologetic vein, for this eccentricity in costume and coiffure, trying to show that it was the outcome of an inward necessity, the need they felt to give outward and visible expression to their hate for Philistinism, their love for beauty and poetry. "It was no troop of Attila's Huns," he says, "filthy, wild, dishevelled, stupid, that besieged the *Théâtre Français*; they were the knights of the Future, the champions of the Ideal, the defenders of freedom in Art: and they were young, and free, and beautiful. True, they had hair—one can't be born in a wig—a great deal of hair; but it was well-combed hair, falling in soft, shining locks. True, some of them had fine moustaches, and others full beards. But these well became their proud, inspired, audacious heads, which the masters of the Renaissance would have been glad to have for models."<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays no one has much faith in long hair as a sign of genius; the velvet jacket has been soiled with much ignoble use; and the big wideawake covers heads other than those of artists. But the war between free Art and Philistinism still goes on, and seems unlikely ever to end; and it was these young men who first set it afoot.

It is not a little remarkable that this first battle, the production of *Hernani*, ended in a success. For the performance was not at all what it should have been; it was far from bringing out satisfactorily the glow of passion, the splendour of colouring, the Renaissance joy in strong words and violent action, which the poet had put into his play. The players were not only hostile, prejudiced

<sup>1</sup> Théophile Gautier: *Histoire du Romantisme*, p. 101.



beforehand against the new school, they were also lacking in power to give due expression to its aims. The only one who really gave satisfaction to the author and his friends was the fine old actor, Joanny, who made it a point of honour to fight his best under the young poet, as he had fought in days gone by under the old General, his father.

Perhaps, however, the actors' treatment of the play, by smoothing away its sharp edges, helped to make it go down with a public wedded to the old-fashioned classicism; perhaps, too, the audience found it less revolutionary, less long-haired and red-waistcoated, than it had expected, and accordingly directed its wrath against the mischievous band in the pit rather than against the author behind the scenes. It is certain, at least, that in spite of the strife and the tumultuous scenes which marked its progress, the first performance of *Hernani* was a very great success, so much so that even before it was over Hugo had secured a very favourable agreement with a publisher and a sum of 6000 francs in ready money which came in exceedingly handy.<sup>1</sup>

But though the Romantics had won their first battle, they had made no real, permanent conquest of the *Théâtre Français* and its public. The conflict was renewed at each subsequent performance. Hugo received a number of threatening letters so violent in their terms that some of his friends thought it necessary to escort him home each night after the play, as a protection against murderous attacks.

In our age and in our country, where, in the memory of this generation at least, there has never been a time when men's minds were passionately agitated about an artistic question, it is hard to make people understand how it was possible for a purely artistic movement like Romanticism to divide a whole nation, so to speak, into two fanatically hostile camps. Small incidents bring the fact home to us better, perhaps, than long explanations. In the extreme south of France, at Toulouse, a young man who had probably

<sup>1</sup> "His total capital was not more than 50 francs," says Mme. Hugo in her sketch of her husband's life.—*Victor Hugo raconté par un témoin de sa vie*, p. 274.

never seen, perhaps had never even read *Hernani*, was killed in a duel fought in defence of the play. And a corporal of dragoons, who lay dying at Vannes, in Brittany, provided in his will that the inscription on his tombstone should be: "Here lies one who believed in Victor Hugo."

But no fortress is more impregnable to assault by a band of rebellious poets than is a reactionary State Theatre. Hugo's next drama, *le Roi s'amuse*, was prohibited after the first performance, and the second did not take place till fifty years later. The action of this play, as we know, takes place at the court of Francis I., and deals with that light-minded monarch's intrigue with the daughter of Triboulet, the Court jester. The first performance was not a success, the piece being clumsily staged and badly acted; but it was not for this reason that it was withdrawn. The reason officially given for the prohibition was the immorality of the play, but in reality it was vetoed because it was regarded as tending to justify regicide, or at least to excuse it<sup>1</sup>—and though Hugo maintained, with perfect justice, that it was impossible even for the most malicious to discover the least resemblance between Francis I. and the monarch of the day, the Citizen-King Louis Philippe, the veto was upheld, and this animated drama, true product of French romanticism and typical of its time and its author, had to wait for its resurrection till long after the Republic had been established and Hugo had become a classic.<sup>2</sup>

The comedies of the young Alfred de Musset: *On ne badine pas avec l'amour*, *Les Caprices de Marianne*, *Il ne faut jurer de rien*, etc., delicate and iridescent, witty and touching as they were, both in form and in content—not to mention *Lorenzaccio*, that brilliant picture from the

<sup>1</sup> In the play Triboulet wishes to kill the King, for having seduced his daughter.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Roi s'amuse* was revived in 1882. All the original performers had then long been dead, but Hugo was still alive, and this second performance shaped itself into a great and solemn celebration, an act of reparation to the venerable poet. The theatre and the performers proved much more equal to the occasion than their predecessors of fifty years back; one chief reason being that there had appeared in the meantime, in Mounet-Sully (born 1841), a great romantic actor—perhaps the only one the *Théâtre Français* has ever possessed—who made a dazzling Francis I., just as in an earlier revival of *Hernani* he had been the very Robber-Chief of whom Victor Hugo had dreamed in 1830.



Florentine Renaissance—were regarded as quite unplayable, and even the slightest of them did not appear on the boards of the *Théâtre Français* till some twenty years after they were written.<sup>1</sup> True Romanticism, in short, did not and could not thrive within the walls of the *Théâtre Français*. Casimir Delavigne, half classical in method and mediocre in talent, who plucked a few of the most easily accessible flowers of Romanticism wherewith to freshen up his somewhat dry and dusty pieces, was the chief purveyor of serious and historic drama<sup>2</sup> to the theatre, while Eugène Scribe and his coadjutors flooded the French stage, and indeed practically all the theatres of Europe, from their wholesale manufactory of comedies, vaudevilles, and musical pieces. Scribe made dramatic authorship a highly lucrative industry, entertained the European theatrical public for some fifty years together, and provided the stage with a number of conventional models out of which actors of talent could make figures that at a pinch might pass for human beings. But it is doing him no injustice to say that in the whole of his pieces, numbering some four hundred, it would be vain to seek for a single individual utterance of feeling, of passion, even of humour; while there was so little substance in his famous technique that it hardly outlasted his own lifetime, and has now lain worn out and done with for more than a generation.

The Romanticists had dreamed of flooding the *Théâtre Français* with a sea of poetry—what came to pass instead was that Scribe opened his tepid freshwater reservoir, and the players, who had been too weak to breast the billows of romance, splashed about happily in the calm, shallow waters, and learned to perform quite a variety of nimble and amusing feats.

A new race of players grew up in the shelter of the

<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, when they did appear they became one of the glories of the French stage. French actors found it much easier to enter into Musset's world, which plays with despair with such graceful sophistication, than into Hugo's, with its severe, heavily-charged pathos.

<sup>2</sup> Casimir Delavigne (1793-1843) enjoys, or enjoyed, a certain celebrity in France. His most famous play is *Louis XI.*, which made a great success, chiefly due to its very effective title-rôle.

bourgeois monarchy. The excellent old actor, Fleury, died in 1822; and with him vanished the last remnant of the frivolous, slightly depraved elegance of the eighteenth century; the conscientious Baptiste *ainé*,<sup>1</sup> who took over the 'line' of *pères nobles* from Vanhove and carried it on for many years in a style of pedantically correct classicism, retired in 1828. In the place of men like these there now came to the front a younger group of players, representing neither Romanticism nor Classicism, but the steady-going bourgeois drama of the 'forties, players who were always well-balanced, with just sufficient emotional force, just enough comic power to serve their turn. This generation reached its highest point in men like Provost, Samson, and Régnier, three excellent character-actors, cultured, amusing, refined without being finical, with a sense for reality that never went inconveniently deep, a sensibility that never flamed into passion—perfect exponents, in short, of the art most agreeable to an average public, the art of the *juste milieu*.

And then, in the midst of all this somewhat drab domesticity, in which Melpomene's dagger seemed transformed into the civic umbrella, there suddenly appeared, slender, erect and pale, the figure of the young Jewess, Elisa Félix, known to men as Rachel, to call back to the world for a time the spirit of tragedy, and arouse an enthusiasm, unlooked-for and in that age almost unnatural, for her hero Racine, whom the Romantics at

<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Anselme, *alias* Baptiste *ainé* (1761-1835) came to Paris from the provinces in 1791, and obtained an engagement at the Marais Theatre, where, among other exploits, he was the first to play Schiller's hero in a horrible adaptation of *Die Räuber*, named *Robert, chef de brigands*. He joined Talma in 1793 at the *Théâtre de la République*, where, in the course of time, he made himself a very solid position in the company. He was a very tall, thin man, with a nasal voice. His diction smacked a little too much of the teacher and the theorist in accentuation; but he was a very popular and conscientious instructor at the *Conservatoire*, a class of work for which he seemed specially created. His brother, Paul Eustache Anselme, *alias* Baptiste *cadet*, was also a popular actor at the *Théâtre Français*, but, in contrast to the correct elder brother, he was a natural burlesque comedian who delighted his audiences by his power of representing deafness, stammering, and other bodily infirmities in the drollest, most grotesque fashion. He was one of the few actors who could wring a smile from the Emperor Napoleon, and he was 'commanded' to appear at Fontainebleau quite as often as Talma himself. Baptiste *cadet* died in 1839.



least had firmly believed to be safely buried for good and all.

But an account of this remarkable, this literally unique actress, and of her artistic contemporaries, would lie apart from the aim of this book, which must follow the course of the romantic drama, and show where and in whom it found its interpreters.

## II

The Odéon Theatre—Harel and Mlle. George—The first performance of *Antony*—Mme. Dorval and Bocage; the nature of their Art—"The great Frédérick," his life as mummer and as artist.

It was natural that the young Romanticists should try to escape from the *Théâtre Français*, where they were exposed to ridicule and annoyance, where the players were reluctant and the public of regular habitués hostile. But they did not leave it with a light heart. For about a century and a half the *Théâtre Français* had been the only theatre that counted. True, the Revolution had produced a crop of new theatres, and the faith in the natural, inalienable supremacy of the *Français* had been somewhat shaken at the time when Talma and his comrades broke away and established their own theatre. But Napoleon had brought the two contending factions together again, and, putting down most of the crowd of upstart rivals, had restored the venerable *Comédie* to its ancient splendour. The Restoration Government, however, had found it expedient to take a second theatre under its wing, give it a substantial subvention, and place it under the patronage and supervision of the Court. This was the old *Théâtre de l'Odéon*,<sup>1</sup> in which the *Comédie* itself had had its abode for a number of years, and which was now given the title of *le deuxième Théâtre Français*.

It can hardly have been this name, with its suggestion of second-rateness, nor yet the Government subvention, still less the advantages offered by State supervision, that tempted the Romantic poets to seek sanctuary here. It was rather the change of management and of system which

<sup>1</sup> The name, however, was not old. It was first so named in Revolution times.

had taken place, just at this juncture, in this "Second *Théâtre Français*." In 1829 Jean Charles Harel had been appointed Director of the *Odéon*. How this eccentric and untrustworthy, though amiable and amusing adventurer had succeeded in obtaining an important post like this, in which, apart from other advantages and emoluments, he received a State subvention of 160,000 francs, only the gods can tell. Certain it is, however, that this man, who had never before managed a theatre, and who, apart from the fact that he had been and still was the lover of Mlle. George, had had no connection whatever with the stage, now began, and continued for many years, to exercise a decisive influence on the theatrical life of Paris, more particularly in bringing to the front the Romantic School in drama. He was at this time only thirty-three years old. He had begun life in his eighteenth year as Sous-préfet at Soissons, was appointed Prefect by Napoleon at the time of the Hundred Days as a reward for the courage shown by him during the foreign invasion, was banished after the Restoration, and while in exile met Mlle. George, who obtained an amnesty for him. And now this remarkable couple, who, though not legally married, for twenty-seven years held fast to each other through all changes of fortune, were safely installed in the direction-in-chief of the second theatre in Paris; she as a 'leading lady,' still brilliant in spite of her forty-two years; he as a Director, rich in ideas and fertile in expedients, in the world of affairs an excellent man of business, or what is known as such, in virtue of his adroitness in steering from bankruptcy to bankruptcy without final shipwreck, in private life much of a Bohemian, since, while Mlle. George developed an oriental magnificence in her home life, he lived from hand to mouth, shabby and slovenly in his dress, but always smiling, whether things went well or ill, and always with a *bon mot* or a paradox on his lips.

The lady's beauty was celebrated in prose and verse by all the young bards, and was as eminently suitable to the young dramatists' Lucrezia Borgias, Mary Tudors, and Marguerite de Bourgognes as it had been to the



Clytemnestras, Agrippinas and Cleopatras of the classical drama. Moreover, though tragedy was her *métier*, she was sprightly, good-humoured, and an excellent hostess, so that her receptions and her suppers became highly popular meeting-places for the sociable young Romantics, who loved to go about in droves, and never tired of discussing endlessly the burning questions of the age in literature, art, and politics. "George's suppers were charming," says Alexandre Dumas, "and bore very little likeness to Mars' suppers, though the same people were often to be met at both. In these cases the guests usually take the stamp of their hostess. Mlle. Mars was always a little stiff, a little formal ; she kept the tongues of even her most intimate friends in leash, as it were, never letting their wit go beyond certain limits. On the other hand, George, who beneath her Empress-mask was a most genial soul, gave a free field to wit of every kind, and could laugh with all her heart, whereas Mars would sit most of the time smiling with the points of her lips."<sup>1</sup>

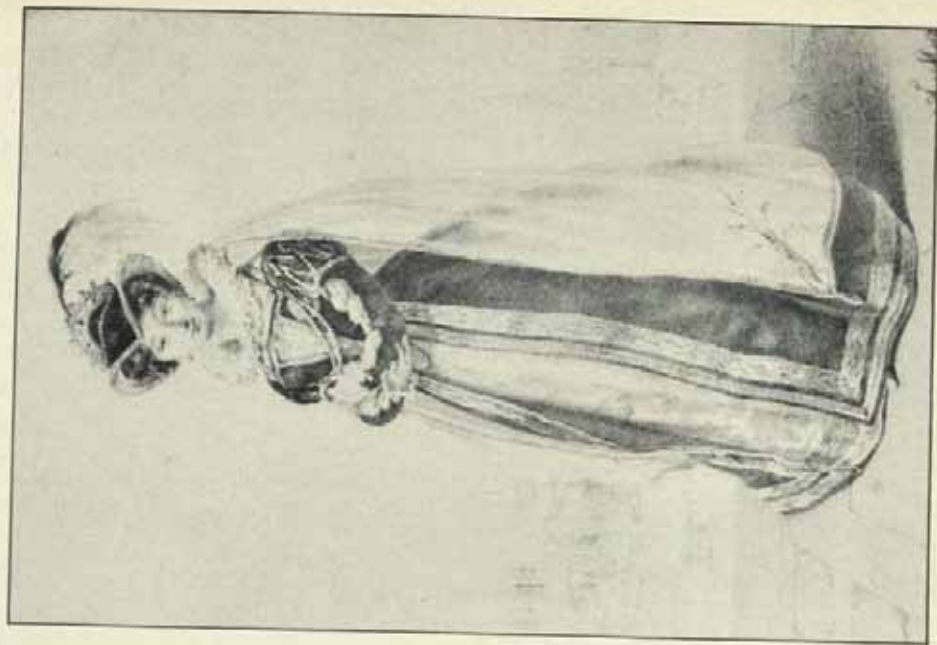
And Harel ! Who could resist this eccentric, fantastic Director, who always got wind of the matter when any of the young poets had a piece on the stocks, and straightway bought it unseen, only stipulating that there should be a good part for Mlle. George ; or, if they had nothing in hand, gave them the idea for a new piece, and forced one or other of them to write it at once. And when such a new piece was finally to appear, what a pother he would keep up about it in the Press !—for, of course, he was an unrivalled master in the art of puffery. In 1831, when the cholera was paying its first unwelcome visit to Paris, and all the theatres in consequence were playing to empty benches, Harel sent the following communication to the papers : "It is a surprising circumstance that the theatres are the only places of public resort where no case of cholera has as yet been shown to have occurred, however great the numbers of spectators have been. We offer this incontestable fact as a subject for scientific investigation."

It is not surprising that the young dramatists felt more at home with this amiable couple than with the rigid,

<sup>1</sup> A. Dumas : *Mes Mémoires*, viii. 277 seq.



51.—Mlle. George in *Rodrigue* (p. 205).



52.—Mme. Dorval as Queen Elizabeth in *le Château de Kenilworth* (p. 207).





reactionary *Théâtre Français*. In fact they were all soon the willing captives of the enterprising Harel, even Victor Hugo, to whose personal tastes the excessive obtrusiveness and push of Harel's business methods must have been highly repugnant. And in due time there came to pass a whole series of productions at the *Odéon*, and afterwards—when Harel's management of his first theatre had ended in financial disaster—at the *Porte-Saint-Martin*, which still, after the lapse of nearly ninety years, re-echo in the history of literature and of the theatre.

There were failures not a few, as there always are at every theatre—more failures, very likely, than there need have been, for Harel, in his perpetual hunt for popular success, picked up indiscriminately everything he came across—but there were also victories that nearly took the public's breath away, that aroused a jubilation, an enthusiasm, a passion, sometimes a horror, such as we in these days have never known in a theatre and find it difficult to understand. Such productions as that of Victor Hugo's *Lucrezia Borgia* and *Ruy Blas*, of Alexandre Dumas' *Antony* and *la Tour de Nesle* marked in their own way epochs in theatrical history, when people felt that they had before them something new and wonderful, and submitted willingly to be carried away by the mighty flood of passion which, it seemed to them, surged through these plays.

Let us take, for instance, Alexandre Dumas' description of the first performance of his *Antony*, a drama of modern married life, in which Antony, the type of a romantic, daemonic lover, pursues a married lady, the Comtesse d'Hervey, with his frantic, ungovernable passion, wins her, and then kills her to save her honour. Adèle d'Hervey was played by Mme. Dorval, Antony by Bocage, of whom we shall speak later. During the first performance Dumas had left the theatre to cool his heated blood in the fresh air, and came back again just before the end of the fourth act. His description of the scene must be given in his own words, which still convey a vivid impression of the glowing emotion, the fever of excitement, which marked these great nights in the theatre.

"I had a box on the floor of the house," he says,



"close to the stage. I made a sign to Dorval to let her know that I was there; and she signalled back to show she had seen me. The scene between Adèle and the Viscomtesse began—the scene of which the key-speech is: 'Mais je ne lui ai rien fait à cette femme!' And then followed the scene between Adèle and Antony, in which Adèle repeats three or four times the words: 'C'est sa maîtresse.'

"Well! speaking now after two and twenty years have gone by—and in these twenty-two years I have written many dramas, have seen many plays acted, have applauded many actors—I say deliberately, that a man who has not seen Dorval play those two scenes, though he may have seen every other play of the modern repertory, can have no idea of the height to which pathos can be carried.

"My readers know how this act ends. The Vicomtesse enters unexpectedly; Adèle, discovered in Antony's arms, tears herself away with a cry, and disappears. After the Vicomtesse comes Antony's servant, who has ridden post from Strasburg to tell his master that Adèle's husband is returning home. Antony rushes out in desperation, in madness, crying out: '... malheureux! ... arriverai-je à temps!'

"The act ended, I rushed up on to the stage. Dorval was there already, busy disarranging her hair and pulling her flowers to pieces. She had moments of passionate abandonment in which she was inimitable.

"The scene-shifters were hard at work changing the scene . . . frantic applause sounded from the auditorium.

"'A hundred francs,' I shouted to the scene-shifters, 'if the curtain goes up before they have stopped clapping!'

"In two minutes the three knocks<sup>1</sup> were heard. The curtain went up. The scene-shifters had earned their hundred francs.

"The fifth act began, literally, before the audience had done applauding the fourth.

"But now came a moment of terror for me. In the

<sup>1</sup> The signal in French theatres for the rise of the curtain.

middle of the scene between the lovers, when, in agony of soul, they are struggling with a sea of troubles, and can find no way either to live or to die together, at the point where Dorval was to burst out: 'Mais je suis perdue, moi!',<sup>1</sup> I had arranged at rehearsal that Bocage, with a casual movement, should place an armchair in position, so that Adèle could sink into it horror-stricken at the news of her husband's return. And Bocage forgot to turn round the chair!

"But Dorval had entered so completely into the passion of the scene that such a trifle as this did not disturb her in the least. Instead of sinking into the chair, she fell against its arm, and uttered her cry of despair with such a piercing, heartbroken agony of grief that the whole house rose at her.

"This time the plaudits were not for me, they were for the actress, the actress alone, the wonderful, the sublime actress!

"The end of the piece is well-known, the quite unexpected dénouement, which occupies but one sentence, bursting on the audience in half a dozen words. The door is broken in by Baron d'Hervey just as Adèle, stabbed by Antony, sinks down dead. 'Morte?' exclaims the newcomer.—'Oui, morte!' replies Antony coldly. 'Elle me résistait—je l'ai assassinée!' And he throws down his dagger at the husband's feet.

"Such a tumult of cries of consternation, grief and horror burst out in the house that perhaps hardly a third

<sup>1</sup> This requires some explanation. *Antony* had originally been intended for production at the *Théâtre Français*, where Mlle. Mars was to have taken the part actually played by Mme. Dorval. The piece was already in rehearsal at the *Français*, when Dumas withdrew it, principally on account of a disagreement with Mlle. Mars. When the rehearsals began at the *Porte-Saint-Martin*, Dumas was, as we see, in ecstasies over Mme. Dorval's playing. But one line—the above-mentioned '*Mais je suis perdue, moi!*'—she could not get right. She struggled with it at the rehearsals, but could not hit upon a way of giving true, thrilling effect to the terror and self-abandonment expressed by the speech. At last she said to Dumas: "How did Mlle. Mars speak this '*Mais je suis perdue, moi?*'"—"Well, she spoke it rising from her seat."—"Very well," said Mme. Dorval. "then I will stand, and sink down as I speak it." And the next time she came to the difficult line it was as though the ground failed beneath her feet, she sank into a chair exclaiming: "*Mais je suis perdue, moi,*" with a look and tone of horror that drew loud applause from the handful of spectators.



of the audience understood these last words, which of course are the necessary key to the action of the piece, which without them would merely be an ordinary adultery imbroglia, solved by an ordinary murder. And yet the effect was enormous. There were frantic cries for the author, and Bocage came forward and named my name. Then Antony and Adèle were called, and both appeared, to take their share in a triumph the like of which they had never won before, and were never to win again. For that night they had both reached the highest, the most shining summits of art.

"I rushed out of my box to join them, without remembering that the corridors were full of spectators leaving their places in the theatre.

"I had not gone four steps before I was recognized; and then it was my turn to take the author's share.

"A great crowd of young men of my own age—I was eight and twenty then—pale, bewildered, gasping, threw themselves upon me. They dragged me in one direction, they dragged me in another, they embraced me. I had on a green tail-coat, buttoned up tight; they pulled the skirts off it and tore them to shreds. When I reached the stage I was in a round-about jacket, like the one Lord Spencer comes home in. The remainder of my coat had gone to furnish my admirers with relics."<sup>1</sup>

The new leaven which the men of that time found in these pieces is no longer new; and to our age—quite as insusceptible to art as the period of decadent classicism—the passionate emotion which they evoked in poets, players and audiences alike seems high-flown and overstrained. No doubt it was so to some extent. But we must not be misled by this into considering the whole movement as being merely the antics of a set of callow young poets, leading to no permanent results. Romanticism was one of those indispensable shocks which humanity requires to have administered to it at least once in each century, if it is to keep up any sort of forward movement. From the artistic point of view we may be said to be living on it still. But the movement threatens to come to a

<sup>1</sup> Alex. Dumas: *Mes Mémoires*, viii. 112 seq.



standstill, and it looks as if a fresh shock would soon be needed.

In the art of the theatre the Romantic movement was of immense importance, most of all perhaps in France, where stiffness and conventionality had obtained the upper hand more completely than in other countries. But in France, the leading theatre having beaten off the attacks of the Romantics, the celebrities produced by the movement have to be sought elsewhere. The most famous players of the period, the exponents of the Romantic drama, were actors of the Boulevards, of the popular theatres, no longer "*les grands comédiens de Sa Majesté le Roi*."

The poets and the actors of the new school were in close alliance, both as artists and in private comradeship—Hugo, indeed, found his wife in the popular *Porte-Saint-Martin* theatre—and many of the players developed into excellent artists under the influence of the poetic enthusiasts, who usually staged their own pieces. Four of them, indeed, were already excellent: Mme. Dorval and Bocage, the heroine and the hero of the first performance of *Antony*, described above; Mlle. George; and last, but not least, the renowned Frédérick Lemaître, the incarnation of French Romanticism on the stage.

Mlle. George, as we have seen, really belonged to quite another school of acting, but she knew how to adapt herself to the requirements of the new drama; the experience acquired by much travel, and her relation with Harel, a man much younger than herself and exceedingly alive to new ideas, had made her much less rigid and doctrinaire than her former colleagues, who had remained embedded in the traditions of the *Théâtre Français*. Her dark, queenly beauty, so admired by the romantics, and her exuberant form—by this time, indeed, almost too exuberant—were well suited to the more mature, daemonically sensual female figures of the modern repertory. She was an excellent Lucrezia Borgia in Victor Hugo's drama of that name, and was also exceedingly effective as Marguerite de Bourgogne in Dumas' and Gaillardet's terrific *Tour de Nesle*.

Mme. Dorval, whose real name was Marie Amélie Thérèse Merle, *née* Delaunay—she was married to Merle, a literary



man, who for a short time was Director of the *Porte-Saint-Martin*—was of a very different mould. Though she too was somewhat older than the leaders of the new school—she was born in 1792—she was a child of the new age through and through. Her talent, in which temperament was all in all, fitted her as completely for the boulevard theatre, as it unfitted her for the classic stage. She differed from Mlle. Mars, between whom and her there was often rivalry for particular parts—such as Hugo's Marion Delorme or Dumas' Adèle in *Antony*—in much the same way, *mutatis mutandis*, as in Denmark Fru Nielsen differed from Fru Heiberg. While Mars developed her dazzling, rich, distinguished art independently, so to speak, of her personal temperament, and accordingly had it always at command, Mme. Dorval was helpless in characters which she could not build up round her own personality, which afforded no outlet for either the vehement passion or the ensnaring charm which were the notes of her temperament. Her art was accordingly a thing of fits and starts, intuitive, eruptive, uncalculated and incalculable.

But to make up for this, when she saw, when she felt her character, she became one with her conception of it; she acted, suffered, wept and laughed in it precisely as the person represented must have acted, laughed and wept. The theatre vanished; there was no question any more of cunningly contrived acting; it was life itself that one saw. "From the simplest sentence," says Théophile Gautier in his obituary notice of her,<sup>1</sup> "from an exclamation, an 'oh' or a 'mon Dieu!', she could draw forth electrical flashes of effect, quite unexpected, and unforeseen, even by the author. She had within her range screams so piercingly true, sobs that seemed so to tear the bosom, intonations so natural, tears so heartfelt and helpless, that the stage was forgotten, and it was impossible to believe that this was but a simulated sorrow."

The emergence of the new school and the hostile attitude of the *Théâtre Français* towards it were great

<sup>1</sup> In *la Presse*, 1st June 1849; reprinted in *l'Histoire du Romantisme*, pp. 271-277.

strokes of fortune for Mme. Dorval. Hitherto she had had to play in blood-curdling melodramas, and though even in these the beauty and thrilling power of her endowment shone out, yet through them she could never reach the cultured public. No wonder that she was as overjoyed as a child when, at a time when she was already past early youth, the chance came to her of playing the title-rôle in Victor Hugo's drama, *Marion Delorme*, which he had withdrawn from the *Théâtre Français* in order to give it to the *Porte-Saint-Martin*; overjoyed not only to feel herself, for the first time, upborne on the wind of poetry, but also to see before her an audience quite different from her accustomed ones, a literary, a refined, a fashionable 'house,' infinitely interesting and flattering to the little actress of the Boulevards.

It is true that a part such as that of Marion Delorme, the elegant courtesan of the time of Louis XIII., was not altogether suited to Mme. Dorval. Her training had not been very thorough, and having to speak in verse hampered her a good deal. Besides, elegance was not her strong point—she was a child of the people, and apt to be careless in her dress. Prose and modern costume suited her much better. But where the action of the piece begins to develop, where Marion ceases to be the fashionable courtesan, and becomes a mother desperately striving to save her child, Mme. Dorval rose to a height of touching, womanly despair which bathed the house in tears. "No words," says Mme. Hugo, "can describe the expression she put into the lines:

*Ecoute,*  
*Ne me refuse pas,—tu sais ce qu'il m'en coûte !*  
*Frappe-moi, laisse-moi dans l'opprobre où je suis,*  
*Repousse-moi du pied, marche sur moi ;—mais fuis !*"

Mme. Dorval marched from triumph to triumph in the Romantic repertory; but her greatest victory of all was perhaps her Adèle in *Antony*. Her performance of this part even obtained for her the offer of an engagement at the *Théâtre Français*, where she was to have made her début as Adèle, after having played the part nearly a hundred times at the *Porte-Saint-Martin*. But Thiers,



who was at that time Minister of the Interior and as such in charge of the Royal theatres, under pressure from anti-Romantic politicians, forbade the production of the piece at the *Français*,<sup>1</sup> and Mme. Dorval consequently withdrew from her engagement.

She had no real reason to regret this. She remained, till her comparatively early death in 1849, the most inspired interpreter of the women of the Romantic drama, and in her own domain was never surpassed.

Bocage,<sup>1</sup> one of the two actors who played with her in her chief rôles—Frédéric Lemaître was the other—was the very type of the romantic lover or hero, the Byronic, statuesquely beautiful young man, concealing under the calm exterior of the accomplished man of the world a secret anguish, a hidden crime, a world of sorrows. He was tall, slender, dark, "beautiful as an Apollo" as Heine says of him, with long dark-brown hair and deep blue eyes. We may picture him as a mixture of Mikael Wiehe and Ludwig Devrient, with hardly so much soul in his playing as the first, and much inferior to the second in fantasy and richness of colour, but full of power and manly force upon the stage. He was born in 1801, so that he and Victor Hugo and Dumas were all three young together, and it was in the days of his youth and in the plays of these two young contemporaries that he won his greatest triumphs, and became famous as the most daemonically seductive lover on the French stage. Parts such as that of Didier, the courtesan's grave, severe son in *Marion Delorme*, Antony, who nourishes a devouring, unquenchable passion for a married woman, and kills her to preserve her honour, and

<sup>1</sup> This, by the way, gave occasion to an interesting law-suit between Dumas and the *Comédie Française* (the real defendant being of course the Government), the result of which was that Dumas was awarded damages to the amount of 10,000 francs.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Martinien Tousez was his real name. He was born at Rouen, of poor parents, and spent a somewhat miserable early youth as a journeyman weaver and in other very humble callings. But he acquired a certain amount of culture, and, thanks to his handsome appearance, obtained an engagement on the provincial stage. He got so far as to make a début at the *Théâtre Français*, but was not permanently appointed. Thereafter he wandered about from theatre to theatre, till at last he made a hit at the *Porte-Saint-Martin*, two of his successes being *Shylock*, and *Napoleon* in *Napoléon ou Schönbrunn et Sainte Hélène*.

Buridan, the mediaeval adventurer in *la Tour de Nesle*, who subdues even the sensual, cruel Marguerite de Bourgogne by his courage and resource, were those that made his name and were lastingly identified with it. The period when the vogue of these and similar pieces was at its height—the years between 1830 and 1840—was his most brilliant time. When taste again turned more in the direction of the domestic drama, his fame declined, as his type went out of fashion. He seems to have been somewhat monotonously gloomy and 'fateful,' somewhat wanting in humour and lightness of touch, but he was clearly a fine, manly actor, with a good head and a determined character. The *Théâtre Français* should have been a most suitable haven for him,<sup>1</sup> but he preferred to go his own way, was sometimes manager as well as actor—at the *Odéon*,—and went on acting till his death in 1862. Shortly before his death, indeed, he revived his former glories in a piece by Paul Meurice called *les Beaux Messieurs de Bois Doré*, in which he played with extraordinary success a long and difficult character-part—his last.

Eduard Devrient, who met Bocage during his sojourn in Paris in 1839 and was much attracted by him, gives in one of his letters home a good picture of this hero of the romantic stage, now so nearly forgotten, of whom we have not many descriptions. He writes: "Guyon . . . introduced me to Bocage, an actor of genius, who in recent years has played at the *Porte-Saint-Martin* Theatre, breathing triumphant life into all the extravagant characters of the new Romantic school. I found him a pale man with a look of physical suffering, well on in the forties.<sup>2</sup> He wears his rather long black hair tossed negligently back from his forehead, and has also a moustache, like almost everyone here. He has a slender, rather stooping figure, carelessly dressed; in his whole manner and

<sup>1</sup> He tried the *Français* several times, but could not rest content there. His theatrical life altogether was a restless one. During two interregnums he managed the *Odéon*, and afterwards for a time a minor theatre. In his last years he was constantly changing theatres.

<sup>2</sup> Eduard Devrient has a tendency to overestimate the age of his Parisian fellow-artists. Bocage was at this time only thirty-eight.



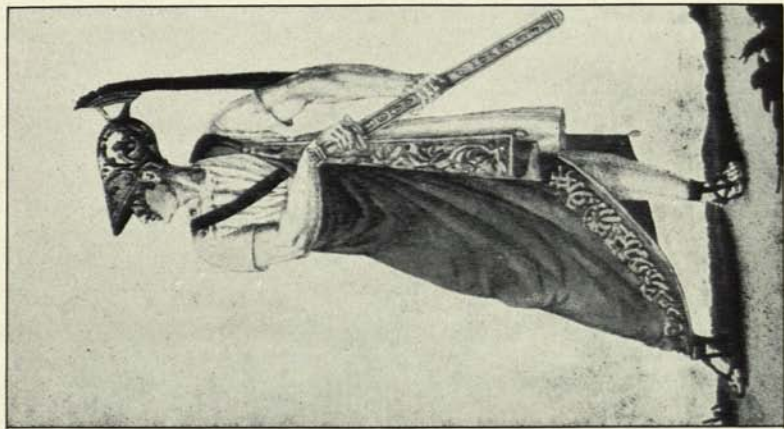
bearing and all his movements I was struck by a likeness to my great uncle, Ludwig Devrient. Though I could not make out this likeness in individual features, yet in his way of opening his eyes wide and in the feverish play of thought on his high-arched forehead, there were flashes of something so like identity as to give me a sort of electric shock. . . . Bocage was sitting right opposite me, and the way in which he put his eyeglass into his eye, looked out of the window, and, in the midst of the conversation, made remarks about the passers-by, constantly reminded me strongly of my uncle." Of Bocage's acting, which he evidently greatly prefers to Frédérick Lemaitre's, he says in another letter: "I have been fortunate enough, after all, to see Bocage act.<sup>1</sup> . . . In a serious comedy (*sic*) named *Henry Hamelin*<sup>2</sup> he plays a business man who, absorbed in a long struggle to escape bankruptcy, has neglected his wife, with the result that she has let herself be led away by her interest in a young painter, innocent enough in itself, to commit various indiscretions. Finally her eyes are opened to her error, and she turns back to her husband, full of affection. Bocage has in consummate perfection all the qualities that make serious French actors attractive. His warmth and tenderness of feeling, his deep anguish of soul when he is obliged to feel jealousy, his stunned, suffering look when he bids farewell to his thoughtless wife . . . his quiet, manly bearing towards the would-be seducer—there is a fullness and concentration of art in all this that gives us, as it were, a view of the deepest foundations of human life. His playing, too, is of the simplest, most unpretending naturalness; his movements and attitudes, his use of the furniture of the scene—a chair, a table—are so intimately homelike—I can find no other word for them. This unstrained spontaneity in every slight, small touch, how much greater an effect it produces in acting than the obvious striving to assert oneself! True, it is a different

<sup>1</sup> Bocage had told Devrient that he was not on in any of the pieces of the current repertory, and had not acted for five months.

<sup>2</sup> This play was produced in 1839 at the *Gymnase* Theatre, where Bocage was engaged from 1839 to 1841.



53.—Caricature of Bocage (p. 214).



54.—Lafon as Achilles in *Iphigenia in Aulis* (p. 218).



55.—Frederick Lemaitre (p. 218).





sort of effect from what is usually understood by the word ; for Bocage's acting is seldom much clapped. You can imagine how I rejoiced in this contempt for the loud applause of the multitude, which can be won by such petty artifices, and which only really honours an artist when he has not in any way played for it."<sup>1</sup>

But when, after this glowing eulogy of Bocage, Eduard Devrient turns to his great rival, Frédérick Lemaître, all he can find to say of him is: "Frédérick Lemaître, who played the principal part,<sup>2</sup> is remarkably old for his years. His figure is heavy, and he has a somewhat bloated face. He declaimed his lines in a monotonous, melancholy fashion . . . he is only partially successful in rendering the spiritual elevation which the alchemist displays at important junctures."

Reading these cold words, we must conclude either that Devrient was exceedingly unjust, or that he saw Lemaître under exceptionally unfavourable circumstances. For there is no shadow of doubt that Frédérick, more than any other actor in France, was the living incarnation of Romanticism, embodying in himself all its motley, fantastic, eccentric attributes, and that he was far more nearly akin to "my great Uncle Ludwig," as well as to Edmund Kean, than Bocage or any other Frenchman. Not only did he show incomparable power as protagonist of the literary drama of Romanticism, but he had Romance in his blood, and was able to infuse it even into the empty melodrama and popular comedy that formed a large part of the material he had to work in. Not, indeed, Romance of the pale, dreamy order, saturated with "Weltschmerz," but full-blooded, richly-coloured, naturalistic Romance, deriving from the Renaissance and the Middle Ages, not afraid to leap from the sublime to the ridiculous, mingling pathos in the grand style with everyday, grotesque comedy.

He was the first great French player who broke completely with the ancient tradition confining an actor to

<sup>1</sup> Eduard Devrient, *Letters from Paris*, pp. 77 seq. and 214 seq.

<sup>2</sup> The play was Dumas' *Alchimiste*. Frédérick Lemaître was thirty-eight years old at the time.



one 'line' of parts. One day he would play a high tragedy part like Othello, the next a ludicrously fantastic bandit like Robert Macaire; now he would be Hugo's young hero Ruy Blas, in the magnificent costume of the Spanish Renaissance, and again a wretched, filthy old philosophic rag-picker. He never thought it beneath his dignity as a tragedian to throw himself into the antics of burlesque and farce, and the comedian in him never found it tiresome to move in the highest spheres of tragedy.

Frédérick Lemaitre's life in childhood and youth was not like Kean's, an agitated and adventurous one. His education and his early training as an actor closely followed the ordinary, regular course. He was the son of an esteemed architect in Havre, where he was born on the 9th Thermidor An VIII. (28th July 1800) and his baptismal names were Antoine Louis Prosper Lemaitre. The name Frédéric, which he afterwards adopted, was thus not his own; he took it from the name of his maternal grandfather, Charles Frédéric Mercheidt, an old musician, to whom, as a boy, he was much devoted. Both his father and his grandfather died, however, when he was about ten years old, and his mother moved to Paris with her little son. There he received a good education, and it was intended that he should be an architect, like his father. But, from boyhood on, the passion for the stage was in his blood, and the occasional visits to the theatre which were allowed him greatly increased it. When fifteen years old he presented himself, of his own motion, at the dramatic *Conservatoire*, and was actually accepted as *élève auditeur* and placed in Lafon's<sup>1</sup> class. He was very handsome, tall and strong for his age, and had a good voice both for speaking and singing. His instructor thought well of him, and the next year he was entered in a competition for young actors at the *Odéon* Theatre, in which, however, to his great disappointment,

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Rapenouille, *alias* Lafon—or Lafond—was a handsome, elegant actor in the line of lovers' and heroes' parts. He had much charm, both on and off the stage, especially in the eyes of the ladies, but was not otherwise very notable. He was born in 1773, made his début at the *Théâtre Français* in 1800, retired in 1830, and died in 1846.



56.—Charles Deburau (p. 219)





he was unsuccessful—all the judges but one voted against him. True, the one favourable vote was Talma's, and this, one would suppose, should have been enough to secure his election; but young Lemaitre knew nothing of this one voice which had taken his part, and might perhaps have changed the whole course of his life. As it was he went the round of the minor theatres seeking an engagement, and came in the course of his wanderings to one called *les Variétés amusantes*, situated on the unfashionable Boulevard du Temple, and devoted chiefly to spectacular pantomime, such as *Jérusalem délivrée*, *le Siège de Grenade*, *la Libération des Nègres*, *Pyrame et Thisbé*, etc. The young Frédéric was at once engaged to appear in the last-named work, at a salary of thirty francs a month, his rôle being that of the lion. He is said to have roared with excellent discretion; but he soon left his first theatre for another similar one, *les Funambules*. This was also a theatre devoted to pantomime, but pantomime in the old Italian style, and it was soon to become not a little famous, mainly owing to its discovery of a Pierrot of genius in Charles Deburau. The young devotees of Romanticism found a mysterious, fantastic charm in the motley comedy of masks and in Deburau's macabre-burlesque artistry, and the little theatre, which had hitherto catered for the humblest audiences, soon became a fashionable resort, where society ladies and elegant dandies sat on the hard wooden benches applauding the antic humours of the ancient Italian art.

But when Frédéric Lemaitre played there—and played with success, as soon as he had mastered the difficult art of pantomime—though Charles Deburau was already the Pierrot, the theatre still appealed only to the most popular audiences. Originally it had been part of the actors' business to stand outside in costume, beating drums and attacking the passers-by with witticisms, to lure them inside. They had now been relieved of this duty; but there was still a crier, an *aboyeur* as he was called, to make humorous speeches to the crowd in praise of the performance within doors.

Frédéric was never in the least ashamed of his early



activities at these *Théâtres à quatre sous*, as they were called. In reading his Memoirs we receive the impression that these were gay and glorious days for the young player. In the mornings he attended the *Conservatoire* and pursued his studies under Lafon; in the evenings he was to be found as "handsome Count Adolphe" among the Italian masks on the stage of the little showman's booth, engaged in a competition with Pierrot to see which could draw the loudest yells from the pit.

The small side-show theatres were finally given up, and Frédérick Lemaître then went to Franconi's *Cirque Olympique*, where the repertory at that time consisted of big battle-pieces, such as *la Mort de Kléber*, *la Prise de Berg-op-Zoom*, *la Mort de Poniatowski*, etc. Here he lived and moved for some time amidst the smoke of battles, among horses and clowns, till at last, after a new competition, the *Odéon* opened its doors to him, graciously permitting him to play small confidants' parts in classic tragedy in support of his teacher Lafon and other such brilliant tragedians.

To understand the evolution of Frédérick Lemaître's talent it is necessary to bear in mind the twofold character of the stage-training thus undergone by him. His work in the pantomime theatres and the circus—the work almost of a mountebank, and yet helpful in his craft—and his intercourse with his diligent and unpretending fellow-strollers, fitted him to shine in many rôles—his famous part *Paillasse*, for instance—in which most fine gentleman *sociétaires* would have felt completely at a loss. On the other hand, his years of study at the *Conservatoire* gave him an assured mastery in the handling of verse and generally in the higher walks of drama, quite beyond the reach of the strollers, whose only training was the practice of their craft; and this, even though he modified the traditional style to suit his own requirements, was another source of strength to him, inasmuch as it helped him greatly in dealing with the literary drama of the Romantic school.

He already felt himself a little too mature for the work that now fell to him—to stand on the stage as a sort of



'super' in Roman costume and listen to the 'leaders' declaiming their long tirades; no doubt, too, he was spoiled for such work by having tasted the sweets of applause in the side-show theatres. He soon grew tired of it, and at the age of twenty-three accepted an engagement at the *Ambigu-Comique*, a theatre which, in spite of the mirthful promise of its name, dealt almost exclusively in gloomy, horrific melodrama. Here he soon gained applause and popularity by his acting of the heroes of this unsophisticated line of drama, which was struck out originally by the prolific author, Guilbert de Pixérécourt, and formed, in a sense, a transition stage leading on to the Romantic drama of literature.

But his first real triumph did not come till, by a disgraceful act of treachery towards the sinister *genre* that had cherished him, he turned inside out, into its very opposite, a melodrama conceived in the darkest and most grisly vein, and created the delightful figure with which his name was thenceforth always connected—Robert Macaire.

The immortal Robert came into existence in this fashion:

The *Ambigu-Comique* had accepted a melodrama of the usual pattern, gloomy and gruesome, full of frightful, cynical villainy and noble, plaintive, persecuted innocence. The piece was called *l'Auberge des Adrets*,<sup>1</sup> and Frédérick Lemaître was cast for the most villainous of the villains, an escaped malefactor called Robert Macaire. This was to be his first 'creation' at the *Ambigu*; the rôles he had been given hitherto had all been played by others before him.

The play, however, drove Frédérick to despair; the writing was so miserable, the action so wildly extravagant; it seemed to him that he would never be able to make anything of the utterly absurd, cynical villain he was to play. Suddenly it occurred to him, in reading over his part, that if this scoundrel and his comrade Bertrand were taken as comic figures, if they were treated as parodies on the diabolical villains of the popular melodramas, every speech of their parts would fit into this conception

<sup>1</sup> Les Adrets is a village in the south-east of France, Department Isère.



with such ludicrous aptness as the authors<sup>1</sup> could hardly have compassed if they had wanted to write a parody.

He communicated his discovery to his chief supporter in the piece, Firmin,<sup>2</sup> who was to play the second gaol-bird, Bertrand, and who was no less delighted than Lemaître with the idea of making the couple into a pair of ludicrous, impudent Parisian vagabonds. In the deepest secrecy they worked out their business and by-play, and provided themselves with suitably fantastic costumes, all the while taking the utmost care not to breathe a word about their plans to the authors, and playing their parts at rehearsals in the approved style of melodramatic villainy.

But when the first night came, and the audience saw advancing to the footlights the most amazing pair of bandits they had ever set eyes on—Robert Macaire with a patch over one eye, a burst-in hat stuck jauntily on one side, an old green tail-coat, well-patched red trousers, and a pair of dancing-pumps; Bertrand in a long gray overcoat, and with a truly remarkable old umbrella which never left his hands—the effect was overwhelming, and was in nowise lessened when the sinister speeches came out interlarded with the most grotesque ‘gags,’ or when Robert made his wooden snuff-box, afterwards so renowned, creak and squeak in the most maddening fashion, and always in the midst of the passages where the authors had piled up horrors most thickly.

The play, or rather the pair of villains, made a frantic success. Two of the authors put a good face on what they may well have thought a bad business, but the third ‘accomplice,’ Paulyanthe, a doctor in private life, who as a dilettante author was more sensitive about his work, bore a lasting grudge to Lemaître, and told everyone he could get to listen to him that the actor had ruined his play.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There were no less than three authors: Benjamin, Saint-Amand and Paulyanthe.

<sup>2</sup> The part was afterwards taken by the excellent comedian Serres; it was to his Bertrand that Lemaître most constantly played Macaire.

<sup>3</sup> In collaboration with Benjamin and Saint-Amand, Lemaître afterwards produced a sequel to *l'Auberge des Adrets* called *Robert Macaire*. This piece,



This was the first turning-point in Frédéric Lemaître's acting life. At the age of twenty-three he had become at one stroke a man of note, an actor to be reckoned with, whom authors of melodrama must treat with respect and caution. In the course of his long life, indeed, he played in many worthless popular dramas, and showed in every one of them, even when he took his parts seriously, what an incredible effect he could produce with astonishingly poor material.

The second turning-point in his career was reached when he came into connection with Victor Hugo, and by contact with true poetic art attained to seriousness in his own. This came about when Harel engaged him to play a part in *Lucrezia Borgia*, the first of Hugo's plays to be performed elsewhere than at the *Théâtre Français*. Frédéric Lemaître had already, at three and thirty years of age, so great a reputation that he could choose his own part. He had played many difficult parts already, but had never come in contact with a real poet, hardly with real poetry, for, though he had acted Mephistopheles in *Faust*, the version played was such a horrible perversion of Goethe's poem, that to relieve the flatness of the affair he had inserted a diabolic waltz, composed by himself, the fantastic wildness of which made it the hit of the piece. He was ordinarily, too, extremely inconsiderate in his relations with authors, dealing arbitrarily, according to his own ideas, with his rôles and with the plays themselves. But now, when he encountered a poet of real genius, all this was changed. He asked to be given the part of Gennaro, the unhappy son of Lucrezia Borgia, a secondary rôle, but one of great difficulty, and of great importance to the effect of the piece. In preparing it he was working with an author who knew what he wanted—who conducted the rehearsals himself, arranged everything himself, him-

which is a burlesque pure and simple, was, if possible, even a greater success than its predecessor. Bertrand of course appears in it as well as Robert, and the two bandits go through the most remarkable adventures. Under the name of *Robert and Bertram* the farce went the round of the European theatres. It was exceedingly popular in Germany, and a certain Gustav Räder tried to make out that he was the author. See Gustav Melitz: *Die Theaterstücke der Weltliteratur*.



self designed the scenes, even painted them himself when necessary—and who could explain his intentions clearly to the players. In the hands of an author like this Lemaître was transformed into a most modest and willing instrument. Speaking of the rehearsals of this play, Mme. Hugo remarks, after describing Mlle. Mars' fondness for treating the poet to lectures on literary matters: "M. Frédéric Lemaître, who stood less in need of advice than any of the others, was by far the most docile in accepting the author's instructions. The fact that his part was a secondary one did not make him indifferent to the piece as a whole; he worked with all his might to assist. He helped the other players with their parts, saying: 'That isn't right! See here—better say it like this'—giving the line with exactly the right intonation. Sometimes, when he wanted to show how it should go, he would play a whole scene for one of them, making us lament that he could not play all the parts."<sup>1</sup>

And when the first night came he played his part with wonderful feeling and power, steering it triumphantly past many dangerous sunk rocks and shoals.

He had now shown that he could subordinate himself to the aims of dramatic poetry, even as he could elevate and transfigure worthless stage-carpentry. And he went on from strength to strength in his art, till he had mastered practically all its branches, and not only mastered them but poured into them his personality, his passion, his humour, his feeling. "Elegant as a man of the world," says one of his admirers,<sup>2</sup> "brutal as a costermonger, bashful as a child, impudent as a valet, naïve as a young girl, trustful as a simple townsman, corrupt and crafty as a pasty-faced rascal, taciturn as a conspirator, open and laughter-loving as a good and happy dinner-guest, dark as a thunder-cloud, tumultuous as the thunder itself . . . overwhelming tragedian and sublime clown . . . who makes you weep with his choking tears, who makes you laugh with his laughter, till you roll underneath the benches."

Very few actors in the history of the stage have

<sup>1</sup> *Victor Hugo raconté par un témoin*, ii. 370, 371.

<sup>2</sup> The well-known meridional poet and *improvisatore* Joseph Méry (1798-1866).



57.—Frederick Lemaître as Don César de Bazan (p. 224).





possessed this all-embracing command of their art, and no one whatever in the France of that day approached it. Danes may perhaps be reminded of Dr Ryge, who had a like versatility of powers, but who was pretty certainly less eccentric, more 'classical,' both in his comedy and in his pathos. There was indeed, even in externals, a certain resemblance between Lemaître and Ryge. We are told so, at any rate, by August Bournonville, who, during a visit to Paris, saw Frédéric in one of his most famous parts, the gambler in Victor Ducange's popular drama, *Trente Ans, ou la Vie d'un Joueur*, and has recorded his impressions in a very graphic piece of description :

"In this part he goes through all the stages of the gambling mania, from the victim's twentieth to his fiftieth year; sinks down into poverty and crime, goes about begging, a ragged, crook-backed *lazzarone*, with nothing left of all that he once was—except his expressive eyes. He is given a loaf, and told to cut as much off it as he wants; the first slice he puts into his pocket with a '*pour ma famille*' that sets all hearts a-quiver; but when, later on, after committing a murder, he brings gold home to his wife, and replies to her anxious questioning with: '*Je l'ai trouvé*,' a murmur runs through the audience, as if an abyss had suddenly opened before our eyes."<sup>1</sup>

To name the plays of Lemaître's repertory is to name practically all the successful pieces produced in Paris elsewhere than at the *Français*.<sup>2</sup> But he was, above all things, an actor for the people; he had the same gift as Kean for inspiring enthusiasm in the masses, in the pit and gallery, not by flattering or cringing to them, but by surprising, astonishing, overawing them. And this is why the parts that are most unforgettably associated with his name are parts in popular drama. Old pieces, such as *le Chiffonnier de Paris*, *Paillasse*,<sup>3</sup> *Kean*, still live on the

<sup>1</sup> A. Bournonville: *My Theatrical Life*, 1848, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Also a few of the unsuccessful ones, for instance Balzac's *Vantrien*, which had to be withdrawn after the first performance, mainly, perhaps, because Frédéric had the audacity to make up as Louis Philippe in one of the swindler's incarnations.

<sup>3</sup> I remember, when I was attending the French *Conservatoire* as *élève auditeur*, our instructor, the refined and elegant actor Delaunay, telling us



reputation Lemaitre created for them by his wonderfully moving and imaginative acting.

There was much that recalled Kean in Frédéric Lemaitre's art and in his temperament, but in externals they were exceedingly unlike. While Kean was short, very slight, nervous and exceedingly impulsive, Lemaitre was tall, and in middle life somewhat stout, with very small features, but with large lustrous eyes, which completely dominated his audiences. He treated the public with the utmost coolness and nonchalance, even in very difficult situations. It is related that once, at a performance of *Kean*, Dumas' well-known and exceedingly bad popular drama, he kept the audience waiting three-quarters of an hour, and, when he did arrive, was in such a condition that the stage-manager was afraid to let him appear before the infuriated people. "You cannot go on the stage in your present condition, M. Lemaitre," he said; "we must cancel the performance and give the people their money back, and you will have to make good the amount." "Yes, it's no more than he deserves," said Dumas, who was also present. The veins on Frédéric's forehead stood out with wrath; he roared out: "Hold your tongues, and ring up the curtain," thrust Dumas aside, and went off to dress. The stage-manager did not venture to disobey. The play began, and in due time Frédéric walked on—leaving the staff behind the scenes shivering in dread of what the result might be—and played his first scene with calm, smiling elegance, as if nothing had happened.

In private life he was amiable and good-humoured, particularly when pottering about, in a nankeen suit and a big Panama hat, in the garden of his splendid country-house between Paris and Montmorency. But in dealing with managers or authors for whom he had no special

about Frédéric Lemaitre, and trying to illustrate to us his playing in the scene in *Paillasse*, in which—if I remember rightly—the strolling player comes back to his squalid home and finds there a letter from his wife telling him that she and his child have left him. Frédéric Lemaitre's reading of this letter, and the way in which, after he had read it, the tears ran down his cheeks and fell upon the paper, was unforgettable, Delaunay told us. The mere reproduction of it—though Delaunay was as different from Lemaitre as he possibly could be—has never been forgotten by me.



58.—Frederick Lemaltre (p. 226).





respect, he was difficult, touchy and domineering in the extreme. He was constantly quarrelling with his managers, and changing from theatre to theatre, or going on tour, to London or round the provinces. But wherever he went, the theatres welcomed him, for he brought full houses with him.

His art and his popularity with the public were the passions of his life, and his devotion to them led him to go on acting after his powers had declined, and a new generation had arisen which did not understand his greatness. He lost his voice, and was often so hoarse as to be almost inaudible. But even then he could not give up the stage, going on playing till he was in his seventy-third year. Even on his death-bed, when he was suffering fearful agony from cancer of the tongue, and was hardly able to speak, he was busy planning the arrangements for a final, farewell performance. Death released him on the 26th January 1876.

At his grave Victor Hugo, his companion in arms of ancient days, almost his contemporary, spoke these words of farewell:

"There is in the history of the stage a line, a family as it were, of mighty, unique spirits, who follow each other in succession, and whose privilege it is to reveal to the multitude, to bring to life on the stage, the great figures created by the poets. This proud line begins with Thespis, is continued through Roscius, and comes to us in France with Talma. In our century Frédérick Lemaître has brilliantly carried on the great succession.

"He is the last of these great actors in point of time, the first in honour. No actor has ever been his peer, because, in the nature of things, none *could* be his peer. Those others, his predecessors, represented . . . what are called Heroes, what are called Gods. He, thanks to the age in which he was born, was *the People* . . . was untameable, robust, pathetic, stormy, fascinating as the people. He was Tragedy and Comedy alike. Hence his universal power. . . .

"Now he is dead. . . . The genius of the actor is a light that is quenched. It leaves only a memory



behind. . . . But let this be said: the memory that Frédéric Lemaître leaves behind will be a great and a splendid one. . . .

"I greet thee, and I thank thee, Frédéric Lemaître. I greet the marvellous artist; I thank the proud and trusty ally of my long life of battle.

"Farewell, Frédéric Lemaître."

## PART III

### WEIMAR AND THE ROMANTIC SCHOOL

#### WEIMAR

##### I

The Court of Weimar—The Amateur Theatre—Goethe as actor—  
The open-air theatre at Tiefurt.

WHEN a great man is set in very petty surroundings, a disharmony arises which is seldom resolved in the most desirable fashion, namely, by the surroundings growing till they are in due proportion with the central figure. It more often happens that the insignificant background diminishes the principal figure, giving to its very greatness a touch of the ludicrous. Set Phœbus to drive a toy-cart, and it is not only the cart that becomes ridiculous—the Sun-God himself suffers some derogation.

Something a little like this befell Goethe, when he let himself be appointed to the direction of the little Court-theatre at Weimar. For a man who would not have been out of place as ruler of a United Germany, to be Minister of this Dukedom of Lilliput was in itself a sufficiently petty task. But to appoint him to the actual, practical direction of a little fourth-rate provincial theatre was like making Napoleon General of the Ajaccio town-guard.

Sachsen-Weimar was like one of Hans Andersen's fairy-tale kingdoms, where the Princess spends her time playing at "visiting" with her ladies, and which the Prince, when the fancy took him, could shut off completely under bolt and bar, so that no intruder could stick his nose inside.

Outside the Court a little town with a population of



petty burghers, narrow and snobbish in the extreme, peering up timidly and devoutly to the Palace, the centre, for them, of the revolving universe. Within the Court an existence spent in pleasure, as pleasure is understood in a narrow social circle, rendered comparatively unceremonious by the natural, human disposition of the young Dowager Duchess,<sup>1</sup> and already, even before Goethe's arrival, strongly tinged with a literary, intellectual element.

Here were to be found the bizarre, impulsive Wieland, the young Duke's tutor; the genial, sprightly Musaeus, editor of the well-known collection of folk-tales; Bertuch, the Keeper of the Privy Purse, whose practical ability, combined with his interest in literature, made him indispensable in organizing all festivities and entertainments; besides two courtiers, Von Einsiedel and Von Seckendorff, polished men of the world of easy-going morals, who had unusual talent as amateurs of the drama and music, but whose artistic powers were exclusively at the disposal of the Court. A bevy of handsome, elegant, coquettish Court ladies, with the beautiful singer Corona Schröter, and a few originals like the little, deformed Fräulein von Göchhausen, with the bitter tongue and the literary collector's mania, and the eccentric, downright Countess von Donnersmark, complete the picture of this unusually artistic Court society, in which Goethe was to be the central figure.

It was in 1775 that the Duke, Karl August, brought back with him to his Court, along with his bride, the young poet, then twenty-six years old. And what had happened to the Duke himself, when he made Goethe's acquaintance at Frankfurt, happened now to the whole Weimar circle. As he was already well used to do, the poet came, saw, and overcame almost instantaneously. He came with the glamour of the *Götz*- and *Werther*-enthusiasm about him, and accepted the universal homage with no touch of false humility, with the natural, unhesitating assurance of a young god.

Wieland, who was at once filled with an exuberant

<sup>1</sup> Anna Amalie, mother of the reigning Duke, Karl August. She was thirty-six years old when Goethe came to Weimar.



59.—Goethe.



60.—Goethe and Corona Schröter as Orestes  
and Iphigenia (p. 233).





enthusiasm for his young brother in the Muses, gave expression to the general feeling in verse :

*Ein schöner Hexenmeister es war  
Mit einem schwarzen Augenpaar,  
Zaubernden Augen voll Gotterblicken,  
Gleich mächtig zu tödten und zu entzücken.  
So trat er unter uns, herrlich und kehr,  
Ein echter Geisterkönig, daher!  
Und niemand fragte : Wer ist denn der ?  
Wir fühlten beim ersten Blick, 's war Er !<sup>1</sup>*

Himself full of the joy of life, with the true Rhineland's jocund spirit, healthful and beautiful, all spirit and fire, Goethe fascinated everyone, men and women alike, but first and foremost the youthful Duke,<sup>2</sup> and soon became the soul of all the amusements of the pleasure-loving Court.

Not the least of these amusements were amateur theatricals. The Ducal Amateur Theatre became at this period almost a permanent institution, and Goethe, as a matter of course, at once took his place, by general consent, as its leading spirit and Director.

At this time Goethe's interest in theatrical matters, and still more markedly his knowledge of them, fell short of what might have been expected in the man who had already written *Gotz* and *Clavigo*. In his childhood and youth he had seen a number of French and German plays in his native town, and during his *petit-maitre* period in Leipzig he had been an enthusiastic admirer of the charming actress Karoline Kummerfeld,<sup>3</sup> née Schultze, who was

<sup>1</sup> These lines may be roughly rendered as follows :

A beautiful wizard it was that came  
With a pair of great black eyes aflame ;  
Witching eyes of a godlike glancing,  
Mighty for slaying as for entrancing.  
He stepped in the midst of us, glorious, grand,  
A rightful King of the Spirit-land !  
And no one questioned : Who may this be ?  
We felt at the first glance : it is He !

(Translator's Note.)

<sup>2</sup> Karl August was at this time only eighteen.

<sup>3</sup> For Caroline Kummerfeld, see vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), p. 106, etc. He must also have seen this actress in his boyhood, when he attended the Ackermann performances at Frankfurt ; for she acted there with that company, along with Friedrich Ludwig Schröder, then a young man. See E. Mentzel : *Geschichte der Schauspielkunst in Frankfurt*.



playing there in a company of good standing, managed by Koch; he had, too, written several plays, including the two mentioned above. Of these *Götz* had roused the literary world to enthusiasm, but not on account of its scenic merits—in its original form it was practically unplayable,—while *Clavigo*, as we know, was written in a week, for a bet, and could not therefore, in the nature of things, bear the impress of a deep study of stage conditions, any more than did the rest of his juvenile dramatic work.

To Goethe, as to the others concerned, the amateur performances at the Ducal Court were merely an amusement; but even in his amusements his methodical and artistic disposition made it impossible for him to give himself up to mere aimless dilettantism. The only professional member of this troupe of aristocratic amateurs, with which he made his first theatrical experiments, was Corona Schröter,<sup>1</sup> a beautiful and gifted singer with whom Goethe had made acquaintance in Leipzig. He had obtained an engagement for her as Court-singer at Weimar, and she now came in useful, in addition, as 'leading lady' in the amateur dramatic performances. In her tall, slender, perfectly proportioned figure there was something classical, something ideal, which attracted Goethe strongly, and he liked to write for her and to act with her, while she, on her part, set his poems to music.

Otherwise the company was strictly limited to amateurs,<sup>2</sup> the chief players being the Duke himself, Goethe, Fräulein von Göchhausen, Major von Knebel (a former tutor of the Duke's), Musaeus, and other gentlemen and ladies of the Court; the pieces too were written or adapted by members

<sup>1</sup> Corona Elisabeth Wilhelmine Schröter (1751-1802). She was trained in Leipzig, and appeared there as a singer, developing so much talent that she was able to hold her own even against the famous Mara. She had a many-sided endowment in music; playing the piano and the guitar, and composing beautiful songs. Besides all this she was a painter of talent. Goethe was at one time much devoted to her—his relations of the same period with Frau von Stein notwithstanding—and his attachment to the beautiful singer is said to have been of "a more passionate nature" than his love for the Baroness. See Viehoff: *Goethe's Leben*, ii. 392 seq.

<sup>2</sup> A single exception was made in the case of the performance of Cumberland's *West Indian*, in which Ekhof, now an old man, was invited, as an honoured guest, to play the father's rôle. Ekhof was at this time Director of the Gotha Theatre.

of the circle—Goethe, Einsiedel, Bertuch, Musaeus, etc. Seckendorff was an excellent composer of operetta, while the painter Kraus, also a member of the permanent staff of the Court, designed the scenery.

But it was owing to Goethe that this dilettante theatre came to surpass all others of its kind in celebrity. His despotic way of dealing with the aristocratic amateurs swept aside completely all the intriguing about rôles, the petty squabbles, which usually form one of the chief attractions of private theatricals, and made a clear field for work inspired by real interest in art, profitable both to the performers themselves and to their audiences.

The Court Theatre had been burnt down, along with the Castle, in 1774, and the performances accordingly took place sometimes in the Duke's apartments—or, later, in a ballroom on the Esplanade (now Schiller Street) in the city,—sometimes out of doors, in the Ettersburg Wood or in the Tiefurt Park, where Goethe had huts and other similar erections constructed to suit the plays (usually specially written for the locality and the occasion), and where, with his strong sense of pictorial values, he was able to carry out schemes of artificial illumination which were often highly effective.

He himself, as we have said, was one of the chief performers, playing in every conceivable line of parts. His handsome, stately presence specially suited him for the parts of lovers and tragic heroes; and we still have a picture showing him and Corona Schröter as Orestes and Iphigenia, in the version of the Iphigenia-legend (his first handling of the theme) written by him for the amateur theatre. In this he undeniably presents a splendid appearance in his Greek hero's costume, which is far more tasteful and appropriate than the conventional heroic costume of the stage of that day.

Dr Hufeland, Goethe's physician, thus describes the immediate, spontaneous impression of beauty produced by his appearance in this part: "Never shall I forget the impression made by Goethe in his Greek costume as Orestes at the production of his *Iphigenia*. We seemed to see before us an Apollo. Never before had we seen in



a man such a combination of physical and spiritual perfection as we saw in Goethe that day."

But his playing in tragedy was by no means on a level with his external appearance. Contemporary accounts describe him as having been altogether too curt and vehement in his diction, as well as stiff and angular in motion and gesture. On the other hand, he was an excellent comedian, particularly in farcical parts, as for instance in the Hans Sachs Shrovetide plays, occasional performances of which, in adaptations by Goethe, the Court audiences were not too strait-laced to enjoy.

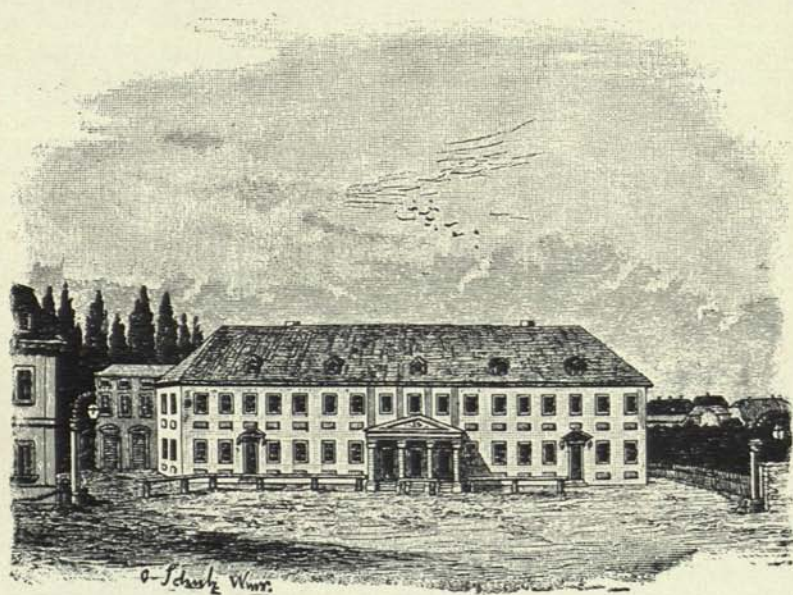
Plays of every sort and description, indeed, could be, and were, performed before this Court, at once so genuinely interested in art and so avid of amusement. Besides giving the plays in vogue at the moment, such as *The West Indian*, etc., the company were not afraid to venture on such experiments as a production of *The Birds* of Aristophanes; they played also Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm*; and, besides producing a whole series of occasional pieces, pageants, and musical plays, these entertainments were the occasion of Goethe's composing his remarkable little piece *Die Geschwister*,<sup>1</sup> in which he himself played Wilhelm, and his graceful vaudeville, *Die Fischerin*,<sup>2</sup> written for the outdoor theatre at Tiefurt, in which, as a prelude to the piece, Corona Schröter in the character of Dortchen sang the *Erl-King*, to music composed by herself. In the staging of this little idyll Goethe introduced one of the most beautiful effects ever attained by him as outdoor stage-manager. The performance took place in the Tiefurt Park, at a spot where a half-circle of great elms formed a natural frame for the scenic pictures. Among these trees he had had several fishermen's huts erected, and the auditorium was so arranged that the spectators could see in the background through the trees the shining curves of the river Ilm. The chief effect, to which the whole of the piece led up, came at the point where Dortchen's father and her betrothed, Niklas, think she is drowned, and call for help. Men with torches are seen hastening up among the trees near by. Answering

<sup>1</sup> The Brother and Sister.

<sup>2</sup> The Fishergirl.



61.—Goethe's *Fischerin*—out-door performance in the Tiefurter Park (p. 234).



62.—The Weimar Court Theatre in Goethe's Time (p. 236).





shouts are heard, and more torches are seen in the distance ; on the opposite side of the river and far off on projecting promontories there spring up fires which are reflected in the water and light up with a brilliant, flickering glare the objects round them, while the farthest background lies in pitchy darkness. At a time when the light-effects and scenic decoration of the ordinary stage were exceedingly defective, this scene naturally produced a deep impression on spectators unprepared for it.<sup>1</sup>

It can hardly be said that Goethe made any regular study of theatre-craft in the years in which this amateur theatre flourished. The whole thing was treated as a mere æsthetic game, one among the many pastimes of the pleasure-loving Court. Nevertheless he learnt much. His natural inventiveness in theatrical matters was increased by practice—we see from the above that the effect of torchlight among dark trees (a device which is almost the only resource of our usually poorly-equipped modern outdoor theatres, being constantly employed by them in season and out of season), was originated by Goethe some hundred and fifty years ago. Moreover, he developed the power of rehearsing plays for performance, and acquired considerable insight into theatrical technique, to which, hitherto, he had paid but little attention.

## II

Foundation of the Weimar Court Theatre—Goethe becomes Director—Goethe's Prologue for the opening performance ; its significance—Poverty of conditions at Weimar—The actors.

IN time, however, as Goethe came to play a chief part in the real world, he slipped more and more away from the mimic world of the stage. Not very long after he had settled in Weimar (5th January 1776) we find him writing to his friend Merck<sup>2</sup>: "You will, I hope, soon learn that I can tragicize a bit *in theatro mundi* too, and am

<sup>1</sup> Goethe's *Complete Works*, 40 vols., vol. viii. p. 215, Note.

<sup>2</sup> Johann Heinrich Merck was born in Darmstadt in 1741 and died there—by his own hand—in 1791. He was Secretary to the Chancery of his native place, but was much interested in literary matters, particularly as critic. He was Goethe's friend and critical adviser in the poet's youth.



capable of playing my part tolerably in all its tragic-comic farces."

We know, indeed, that Karl August was so immensely taken with his new friend, and, in spite of his own natural independence of character, came to rely on him so much, that for many years he ruled his little principality almost entirely through Geheimerath Goethe. Politics and the multifarious details connected with them thrust the theatre, and to some extent poetry as well, into the background of the poet's consciousness, and a long time was to pass before they came to the front again.

The amateur performances died a natural death when Goethe lost interest in the matter; but the eagerness of the Court for theatrical amusements did not die with them. In 1780 a new, inexpensive building had been erected, to be used partly for theatrical performances, and partly for balls and masquerades. This theatre was let in 1784 to the manager of a touring company, Joseph Bellomo (Giuseppe Belluomo), an Austro-Italian, who had been Secretary to the Italian Chancery at Vienna, and was a very estimable man, though a very bad actor. His wife (*née* Nicolini) was also an Italian, and was a very capable singer. His company was an exceedingly poor one, meant really for Italian *opera buffa* only; but Weimar insisted on having great drama, literary drama, as well, and this fourth-rate operetta troupe had to wrestle as best they could with Shakespeare, Lessing, Schiller, and Goethe. The Duke granted a small, a very small, subsidy for himself and his Court, and, the theatre being a public one, the town had to contribute the remainder of the endowment, which, however, was far from sufficient to support even this modest enterprise. Accordingly, in order to make both ends meet, Bellomo was obliged frequently to take his company on tour to the neighbouring cities outside the Dukedom—Erfurt, Altenburg, Eisenach—or, best of all, to the then fashionable watering-place, Lauchstädt, where it was customary for the well-to-do to spend a part of each summer.

It was, of course, impossible that the cultured, critical Court of Weimar should long be satisfied with this humble company of players; and when, after working at Weimar



six years, Bellomo asked for the cancellation of his agreement, Karl August determined to take over the theatre himself, engaging a company and appointing a salaried manager. There was no thought at the moment of employing Goethe in the matter, and certainly nothing could be further from his own views. The thoughts of His Excellency Geheimerath *von* Goethe, now a man of forty-one, were fixed on quite other matters. After his Italian journey, during which the theatre had occupied his attention only in so far as he had found a certain amusement in watching the type-masks of the ancient *commedia dell'arte*, he had devoted himself for the most part to his scientific pursuits, osteology and the theory of colours, and was for the time mildly indifferent to theatrical matters.

The Duke, however, soon found that it was impossible for him to tempt any theatrical expert of reputation to take charge of his little theatre, and he then turned for assistance to Goethe, begging him to assume the chief direction of the undertaking, with a capable business man, Hofkammer-rath Franz Kirms, to assist him as financial manager. Goethe accepted the proposal made him by his friend and Prince "with pleasure," as he himself said, but without the least enthusiasm. He writes, on the 20th March 1791, to his friend, the philosopher Friedrich Jacobi: . . . "I am now about to take up an employment, which is much more a matter of externals" (than the experiments in osteology, of which he had been speaking), "having, indeed, the shows of things for its only object. This is the direction-in-chief of the theatre which is to be established here. I am setting to work in quite *piano* fashion; but it is not impossible that the business may result in some measure of benefit both to the public and to myself. In any case it will be my duty to study the matter more closely, and to write a couple of actable pieces each year. The rest will no doubt arrange itself somehow." On the same day the financial Director, Kirms, wrote to the Minister of Merseburg, who had the licensing of theatrical performances in Lauchstädt: "The company which is to be established here will assemble in May next. . . .



Though it has been established by order of His Serene Highness, and at his risk, it is not yet finally decided whether it is to be called the Court Company, or to take the name of its stage-manager; though indeed it is, and need be, no secret that it belongs to the Court. The chief direction is in the hands of Herr Geheimerath von Goethe." The stage-manager, who in this case was to be the actual working leader of the company, was an actor named Franz Fischer, whose services were obtained from the Royal National Theatre at Prague, and Goethe's name was nowhere mentioned when, quite quietly and without flourish of trumpets, the Weimar Court Theatre was opened on the 7th May 1791, with Iffland's *Die Jäger*.<sup>1</sup> But Goethe wrote the Prologue for this memorable opening performance, and in it he indicated beforehand once for all the unambitious aims he had set before him as attainable in the very modest material conditions:

Der Anfang ist an allen Sachen schwer;  
Bei vielen Werken fällt er nicht ins Auge.  
Der Landmann deckt den Samen mit der Egge,  
Und nur ein guter Sommer reift die Frucht.

Nun, dächten wir, die wir versammelt sind,  
Euch manches Werk der Schauspielkunst zu zeigen,  
Nur an uns selbst, so träten wir vielleicht  
Getrost hervor, und jeder könnte hoffen  
Sein wenig Talent euch zu empfehlen.  
Allein bedenken wir, dasz *Harmonie*  
*Des ganzen Spiels* allein verdienen kann  
Von euch gelobt zu werden, dasz ein jeder  
Mit jedem stimmen, alle mit einander  
*Ein schönes Ganzes* vor euch stellen sollen:  
So reget sich die Furcht in unsrer Brust.  
Von allen Enden Deutschlands kommen wir  
Erst jetzt zusammen; sind einander fremd,  
Und fangen erst nach jenem schönen Ziel  
Vereint zu wandeln an, und jeder wünscht  
Mit seinem Nebenmann es zu erreichen;  
Denn hier gilt nicht dasz Einer athemlos  
Dem Andern heftig vorzueilen strebt,  
Um einen Kranz für sich hinweg zu haschen.  
Wir treten vor euch auf, und jeder bringt  
Bescheiden seine Blume, dasz nur bald

<sup>1</sup> *The Marksmen.*

Ein schöner Kranz der Kunst vollendet werde,  
Den wir zu eurer Freude knüpfen möchten.<sup>1</sup>

The whole of Goethe's programme for his new undertaking, which even at this early stage seems to have been clearly defined in his mind, is contained in these very sober and sagacious words. He perceives that with these actors, collected "from all the ends of Germany," among whom there was not a single player of outstanding talent, far less one of independent creative genius, it was vain to aim at any new, brilliant developments in theatrical art. What he perhaps could do, was so to attune to each other these heterogeneous minor talents as to produce from them a "harmony of *ensemble*," a "beautiful Whole"—though he knew very well that it would take time before even this "grain could ripen." For this reason, since the players all stood on the same level of mediocrity, he warned them against striving breathlessly to outstrip each other, and he adroitly placed this rather contemptuous admonition in the mouth of the performers<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "First steps are difficult in everything ;  
In many works the eye can not discern them.  
The farmer's harrow covers up the seed-corn,  
And only summer's warmth can ripe the grain.

If now we thought (we that are gathered here  
Of the Art Theatric many a work to show you)  
But of ourselves, we might perhaps step forth  
With confidence, each one among us hoping  
For his own little gift to win your favour.  
But when we call to mind that *harmony*  
*In the whole performance* can alone deserve  
Your approbation, that, each one of us  
With each in concord, we must, all together,  
*A Whole of beauty* strive to set before you—  
Fear wakens in us and perturbs our hearts.  
From all the ends of Germany we come  
Now first together—strangers each to each—  
Now first begin toward that beauteous goal  
To press united on ; and each one wishes  
Along with all his comrades to attain it.  
For it boots not here that one man breathlessly  
Should run a headlong course to outstrip the others,  
And snatch away the palm to deck himself.  
As now we come before you, each one brings  
In modesty his one flower, that anon  
The beauteous wreath of Art may be completed  
Which for your pleasure 'tis our aim to twine."

<sup>2</sup> The Prologue was spoken by one of the actors, Domaratius.



themselves, as a piece of modest, deprecatory self-criticism—at the same time intimating to them—if they should understand the hint, which they probably did not—that if the theatre was to come to anything it would be through him and not through them that this would come about.

In the whole course of his twenty-six years' management Goethe adhered strictly to this line, which he had laid down for himself in the very beginning, and this in spite of the fact that he had a great appreciation of individual talent. He admits himself in his *Conversations with Eckermann* that he had a "passionate love for talent"—that is to say, for talent in individual actors and actresses—but adds that he looked upon this passion as a danger to him in his capacity of Director of a theatre, because it was likely to interfere with his impartiality. He never came to regard his actors as individual artists, each possessing a value in and for him- or herself; to him they were only parts of an artistic whole, instruments in an orchestra, accessory figures in a landscape composition. This point of view, however, was rather imposed upon him by the force of the existing circumstances, than adopted by him as a result of inner conviction.

In order to understand Goethe's comparative indifference to his new activities, which many might consider as of great importance, and which, viewed in the somewhat flattering perspective of history, seem in fact to have had important results, it is necessary first and foremost to keep clearly in mind the exceeding poverty of the conditions under which he began his work. Weimar is still but a small town, but in those days it could not be accounted as much more than a large village. It had about 6000 inhabitants, who, apart from the Court and its hangers-on, were principally petty burghers and handicraftsmen in a small way of life. What Goethe himself thought of the theatrical public of the place is quite candidly revealed in a letter of the 28th February 1790, addressed to Reichardt, in which, among other remarks, we read: "Our public has no conception of art. . . . Germans are, on an average, upright, honest folk, but of originality, invention, character, unity and

execution in a work of art they have not the least conception. In a word: they have no taste. . . . Under these conditions you may imagine what amount of hope I feel for the future of their theatre, whoever may be its Director."

The external conditions were miserable. The Duke was no Cræsus, and the amount that he could afford to devote to the Court theatre was excessively small. The building itself was small and poor, the auditorium consisting of a ground-floor divided into two parts,<sup>1</sup> a gallery, and gallery-boxes, with, of course, a Court-box in addition. The prices charged for admission were very low, even by the standards of the time; the dearest seats cost 12 groschen (about 1s. 2½d.), the cheapest 2 groschen (about 2½d.). However successful a piece might be it could only be performed a few times in each season. In order to keep things going at all it was found necessary to follow the practice, previously adopted by Bellomo, of touring the neighbouring cities and watering-places all through the summer; these tours, which embraced some cities of a considerable size—Erfurt, for instance, had some 50,000 inhabitants—and others, like Lauchstädt, where the public consisted of well-to-do summer visitors, were the only means of laying up a small reserve fund against a rainy day.<sup>2</sup>

The scenic equipment—if it could be called by such a name—was necessarily of more than Spartan simplicity. The scenery was of the usual type, consisting of loose wings and a back-cloth, whether the place represented was a room or an outdoor scene. But there was very little of it, and to add to it was practically out of the question. Furniture was regarded as an unattainable luxury. When Iffland came to Weimar on a starring visit in 1796, the theatre was incapable of providing so much as a

<sup>1</sup> The 'orchestra stalls' and 'pit' of our theatres. (Trans. note.)

<sup>2</sup> After the victory of Napoleon at Jena, the Duke was in such financial straits that he could no longer afford to continue his subsidy; and his Finance Minister wanted to close down the theatre. But the financial manager, Kirms, came to the rescue, producing a relatively considerable sum of money which he had saved out of the proceeds of these summer tours, and declaring that the theatre could quite well carry on for some considerable time without any subsidy. He thus saved the actors from being suddenly deprived of their means of livelihood.



chair for the scene in which, as Dallner,<sup>1</sup> he had to fall down in a faint; so that instead of falling into a chair he had to sink down on one knee.<sup>2</sup> As regards the costumes, the case was the same. The idea of providing a new silk dress seems almost to convulse the Principality; at least it leads to diplomatic negotiations between Geheimeraths Goethe and Kirms, of which the upshot is recorded in an extant letter from Kirms to Goethe: "If none of the mantles in stock will answer the purpose (as would be most desirable), a new one will be purchased for Mme. Vohs; to buy a new dress would be too much. Perhaps she could make use of Mary Stuart's white satin dress; or the white satin dress in the wardrobe, the bodice of which Demoiselle Jagemann has recently been wearing, might be altered for the present purpose." Goethe himself complained in private of having to represent battle-scenes or great crowds by means of a dozen 'supers,' or to make an old worn-out forest scene do duty for luxuriant tropical vegetation. But outwardly he took the dignified line, apologizing for the first defect by pointing out that it was impossible in any case to bring on the stage the thousands of combatants of a real battle, and that the imagination could as easily create an army out of a dozen men as out of a hundred. Or he would argue: "A good actor soon makes us forget miserable, unsuitable scenery, whereas the finest scene only makes us feel all the more the want of good actors."<sup>3</sup>

The worst of the matter was, however, that the want of adequate means necessarily entailed the impossibility of obtaining good actors. The troupe with which Goethe began operations was worse than mediocre, and throughout the whole period of his long management he was never able to get together a company of which the quality answered fitly to the literary environment, or even approached the level of the best German companies of the time.

<sup>1</sup> In his own drama: *Dienstpflicht* (*Liability to Service*).

<sup>2</sup> See Böttiger: *Entwicklung des Ifflandschen Spiels*, etc. (Development of Iffland's Acting), p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*, Bk. ii. chap. v.

As far as mere numbers went the company engaged for the new Court theatre was not despicable. It had some twenty members in all, to meet the requirements both of drama and of operatic productions. But in quality it stood very low indeed, and this was not to be wondered at, considering the exceeding smallness of the salaries offered by the Duke and the thrifty financial manager, Kirms. The most highly paid members received eight to nine thaler<sup>1</sup> a week, to play both in drama and in opera. One of the best, Malcolmi, who played, among other parts, Warberger, the Head Forester in Iffland's *Marksmen*, and sang Sarastro in Mozart's *Magic Flute*, received, along with his three young daughters,<sup>2</sup> all actresses in the company, ten thaler a week. On the other hand, the necessities of life were exceedingly cheap. One of the actors, Genast, who afterwards became well known as stage-manager and as Goethe's right-hand man in practical matters, tells us that he paid 1½ thaler a week for lodging, breakfast, dinner and service, "so that a careful man could live respectably even on a salary so small as this."<sup>3</sup>

In artistic gifts no one player rose above the general level of mediocrity, and all were equally unfamiliar with the higher style of drama, or indeed with 'style' of any kind, properly so called. They were specially incapable of handling verse. True, they had played in tragedy and literary drama, but scrupulous adherence to the text had formed no part of their practice. If they failed to remember the author's words—and this very often happened, for care in memorizing parts correctly was the exception in the minor German theatres,—they got through as they best could by speaking any words that occurred to them;

<sup>1</sup> About twenty-four to twenty-seven shillings.

<sup>2</sup> The youngest, Amalie, became later on a well-known actress, and when, as an elderly woman, she took up comic parts, a very excellent one. She married the actor-author Pius Alexander Wolff (1782-1828) who, as an actor, was one of Goethe's favourite pupils, and as an author, won reputation by the production of a number of theatrical pieces, among which one, *Preciosa*, has escaped oblivion, thanks to Weber's music.

<sup>3</sup> Eduard Genast: *Aus dem Tagebuche eines alten Schauspielers* (From the Diary of an old Actor), republished under the title *Aus Weimar's klassischer und nachklassischer Zeit* (Classical and post-classical times at Weimar), p. 47.



and, as they were quite lacking in cultivation, whether artistic or social, we can hardly suppose that the inspirations which came to them were always of the happiest.

Only two members of the original company, indeed, possessed talents capable of development, and these were two mere children, Christiane Neumann, the thirteen-year-old daughter of an actor and actress of Bellomo's company, and Amalie Malcolmi, aged ten. Goethe very soon discovered their budding powers, and set himself to foster them. The former, a child of a rare and noble talent, he soon made the admired little 'leading lady' of the Weimar stage, and only her too early death prevented her becoming a really great actress. In the second, who at the least was apt and teachable, he found a plastic subject to be moulded in accordance with his theories, and she became in his hands a well-marked exemplar of the Weimar school of acting.

The others Goethe left, at any rate at first, pretty much to their own devices in artistic matters, or left them, at least, to the stage-manager, Fischer, which came to much the same thing. But even Fischer, though he was a very level-headed person, soon had more than enough of this collection of inferiority, and before two years were out was heartily sick of his work as stage-manager. The tone of the company and the mutual relations of its members are sufficiently indicated in the following extract from a letter written by him to Geheimerath Kirms, on the subject of the refusal of one of the actors, Einer, to play in a certain production: ". . . Well! some day perhaps the good God will deliver me from this candidate for a madhouse; as I trust that He will also grant me strength to support the eighth wonder of the world, I mean to endure with constancy this admirable company of fools, idiots, evil-minded persons, cabal-mongers, lickspittles, and bandits. To this end I implore an all-good God to grant me patience, strength, and courage."

## III

Goethe's theory and practice—His "Rules for Actors"—His views on scenic art—The 'classic-ideal' style—Goethe's severe discipline.

GOETHE'S theatre was in its beginnings not much more than what the Germans themselves call "eine Schmiere,"<sup>1</sup> and it was only natural that in the first instance his work should consist mainly in the education of his company and the enforcement of discipline. A strict system of discipline was in particular absolutely essential, and it cannot be said that Goethe spared the disciplinary rod in any respect.

There was at all times something in a high degree imposing and awe-inspiring in Goethe's personality; his severe features, his great, brown, flashing eyes under their strongly marked brows, his powerful voice, which became thunderous when raised in anger, all combined to give him authority and impressiveness in every relation. But in relation to his actors in particular, in spite of his close association with their daily work, he occupied a position of remote superiority, which he rendered yet more unapproachable by the bureaucratic formality with which he loved to invest all the business of the theatre.

During the first few years he only occasionally attended the rehearsals, correcting now and then the time in which they were taken and the actors' attitudes, but otherwise only concerning himself with little Christiane Neumann. But later on, as his interest in the work increased, and the personnel improved somewhat, he took part more constantly in the daily work of the theatre, and worked out for himself a detailed theory of theatrical art, the main points of which he placed on record in a small collection of "Rules for Actors," which is still extant.<sup>2</sup>

Anyone coming to the reading of these Rules unprepared, without previous knowledge of the persons for whom and the conditions under which they were written, will be much disappointed. There is nothing in them which marks them as the work of an artist of genius or

<sup>1</sup> A troupe of strollers, a 'penny gaff.' (Trans note.)

<sup>2</sup> *Complete Works of Goethe* in 40 vols. Vol. xxxv. pp. 435-459.



even of a practised thinker. They include linguistic rules which might have been composed by a pedantic school-master, and remarks on attitude and gesture not unworthy of an affected dancing-master. The maxims dealing with the essentials of theatrical art are so diametrically opposed to what are now considered the correct views, that they might almost seem to be meant ironically.

When we consider, however, that these Rules were intended for a set of quite uncultivated people; and that Goethe had been obliged to give up at the outset all idea of dealing with men of talent, capable of independent thought, and was therefore merely aiming at a certain unity of method, a certain mechanical form, attainable by all; this strange little dramaturgy acquires at least the interest inspired by a curiosity.

The first paragraph—for the Rules are divided, in true German fashion, into ninety-one paragraphs—runs thus:

"When a provincialism creeps into the middle of a tragic speech, the finest poetry becomes disfigured and the spectator's ear is wounded. Accordingly the first and most necessary point in the training of an actor is that he should free himself from all errors of dialect and strive to attain a perfectly pure pronunciation. No provincialism is admissible on the stage. Nothing must be heard there but pure German speech, as it has been refined and perfected by taste, art and science."

All this strikes us as a little too obvious—at least as regards tragedy, of which alone Goethe is evidently speaking here. But when we remember that his company had been scraped together from every quarter of Germany, South, North, East and West, that he himself spoke the dialect of Frankfurt, and Schiller, the actors' immediate instructor, broad Swabian, his solicitude for the maintenance on his stage of a uniform standard of pure High German becomes more comprehensible.

His linguistic definitions, indeed, as well as his explanations of the principles of diction, are very incomplete and, in many cases, not at all to the point. In practice, however, he no doubt dealt with the matter in a more thorough and effective fashion. He attached

extraordinary importance to this elementary, verbal side of theatrical art. Following the example of Friedrich L. Schröder, he made a practice of having a series of readings of new pieces before the actual rehearsals began, and at these he corrected all mistakes minutely, paying particular attention to distinct and clear enunciation and purity of speech. In other countries, at least in France and Denmark, this sort of instruction was imparted at dramatic training-schools or by private tuition. But at this period there were no arrangements whatever in Germany for preparatory training in the actor's profession, and, as the members of the profession came for the most part from the humbler ranks of society, it was only natural that language and pronunciation should be weak points with them. Thus, by taking on himself the laborious duty of instructing generation after generation of actors in correct speaking, Goethe performed an excellent work, and one of which the effects undoubtedly lasted far beyond his own life-time. He cannot be absolved from the reproach of having introduced, by his teaching, an excessively mechanical, artificial, rigidly classical style of declamation. But that this style, which was an outcome of the times, lasted so long and prevailed so widely in Germany, was mainly due to the fact that among his pupils there was not a single player of real, independent talent, capable of breaking through the shackles of lifeless rule, and showing that this mechanical standardization of style was really only intended for the dullards.

A relatively lengthy section of Goethe's instructions is devoted to "The attitudes and movements of the body on the stage," and it is especially in this section that his peculiar views on the art of acting are most clearly set forth. He remarks, for instance (para. 38): "The actor must always bear in mind that it is for the sake of the public he is on the stage," and continues, in para. 39: "Accordingly actors should never, in a mistaken attempt at naturalness, play to each other only, as if no third person were present." And finally (para. 82): "The stage and the hall" (*i.e.* the auditorium), "the actors and the audience constitute essentially a single whole."



This, put in other words, is as much as to say that illusion was in Goethe's opinion of no importance, or at any rate was not the vital matter in scenic art. He would not have actors aim at presenting episodes of life going forward as it were unobserved, pictures in which the spectators do not exist, are lost in the darkness and forgotten; and, conversely, he would not have the spectators forget for an instant that they are in the theatre, and a part of it, that they form the necessary complement of the artistic process on the stage. And it is not the object of this process to move the spectators by affording glimpses of insight into the lives of men, but rather to attune their minds to the Ideal by means of harmony, harmony in speech and in attitude, harmony between the stage and the auditorium.

In conformity with this general conception of scenic art, as something wholly turned outward, existing only in the closest dependence on an external audience, Goethe's special instructions in regard to attitude, movement and gesture, and indeed as to speech as well, were likewise concerned with externals, having for their object not the truthful expression of the inner workings of men's souls, but the placing before the spectator of a beautiful and plastically harmonious general picture.

This theory too must evidently have been evolved by Goethe in the course of his practical work, in which he had to deal with a body of actors so incapable of standing or moving with propriety either on or off the stage, that some of the detailed instructions he finds it necessary to give in regard to attitude and movement are so elementary as to border on the ludicrous. Para. 73, for instance, runs:

"A very gross error, which should be avoided, is for an actor, who is sitting, and wants to move his chair forward, to place his hand between his legs, seize the chair, and, rising slightly, drag it forward with him. This is not only contrary to the canons of beauty, it also conflicts with decorum."

And in paras. 66 and 67:

"In order that they may acquire the art of moving the

feet easily and with propriety, actors should never wear boots at rehearsal. Each actor, and particularly the younger members of the company who play lovers and other light parts, should keep a pair of slippers at the theatre, for use at rehearsal. The good results of this will very soon be apparent to him."

Other rules are more general, most of them aiming at the promotion of the intimate relation which, according to Goethe's view, ought to be maintained between performers and spectators. In paras. 39, 40 and 41, we read: "... They (the actors) must be careful, when acting, never to be in profile to the spectators, and also never to turn their backs to them. ... Special care should also be taken never to speak in towards the stage, but always outward towards the public. For the actor must always divide his attention between two objects: viz. the person to whom he is speaking and his audience. Instead of turning the whole head away, it is better, when necessary, merely to turn the eyes. ... But an essential point is this, that in a conversation between two actors the one who is speaking should always move slightly back, and the one who has just ceased speaking, slightly forward."

These rules and many others like them in this collection became a snare to the feet of many, inasmuch as, backed by the authority of Goethe's great name, they gained wide currency in the theatres of Germany and other countries, and were taken by unskilful actors and stage-managers as words of an Olympian, to be strictly and literally observed, without comment or interpretation. It cannot be denied that they thus gave rise to a stiff, mechanical, externalized style of acting which it took many years to eradicate.<sup>1</sup>

At Weimar strict compliance with Goethe's artistic prescriptions was insisted on, and any departure from them gave occasion to official circulars and rescripts of a solemnity which in our less formal days produces a comic effect, but

<sup>1</sup> In my youth I have myself heard several of Goethe's "Rules" put forward by older actors, and have known some of them to be followed on the stage, though neither I nor my seniors knew their origin. For example, in the early days of my stage life, it was a capital offence for an actor to speak with his back turned towards the spectators—which of course induced in us younger men a special partiality for this attitude.



which is very characteristic of the ruling tone in the little Court theatre. Thus in October, 1795, Goethe issued the following Rescript, which was "to be presented to all the performers":

"His Serene Highness the Duke has once more signified to me that a number of the actors do not speak so as to be intelligible in the Ducal Box, and that, particularly in the expositions of plays and in passionate passages, a great deal of the dialogue is lost.

"The only answer I have been able to make is that, both in general and in particular cases, I have repeatedly inculcated on the company the first duty of an actor: viz. to make sure that he is heard and understood all over the house; but that in spite of this I have been unable to attain the desired object.

"His Serene Highness has thereupon been pleased to say that in future, whenever any actor fails to speak distinctly, His Highness himself will at once remind him of his duty.

"I am desirous of conveying this information to the company, in order that this humiliation may not come upon anyone as a surprise."

But it was not only in artistic matters that this strict discipline was enforced. Goethe also introduced a large number of administrative rules and prohibitions, elsewhere unknown at this time, and all designed to promote that character of order, decorum and dignity which it was his object to impress upon his theatre. "Calls" before the curtain and encores of songs were prohibited; the audience was forbidden to signify approval otherwise than by clapping or disapproval otherwise than by silence; no member of the Weimar company was permitted to appear as a 'star' at any other theatre, etc., etc. And any transgression of these prohibitions was visited with substantial penalties. Thus a young actress, Wilhelmine Maas, had appeared at the Royal Theatre in Berlin (under Iffland's management) without Goethe's permission. When she returned to Weimar she was placed under arrest in her own house for a week, and was made to pay the wages of the sentry placed at her door.



Even in their private lives the players were liable to feel the retributive hand of this strict disciplinarian. On the occasion of certain divorce proceedings between a couple named Röpke we find Goethe addressing the Theatre Committee (which consisted of himself as chairman and two other members) in a lengthy communication ending in this delightful fashion :

" . . . As is only right, the Committee declines to interfere in any matters that appear not directly to concern the theatre ; but when a man gives his wife a pair of black eyes, this may concern the theatre very much, if she is cast to play a young heroine's part the same evening. It should therefore be laid down very distinctly on this occasion, that any actor who beats his wife will at once be confined in the main guard by order of the Committee."

With the public he was no less strict than with his company. He kept watch like a dragon to see that nothing unseemly occurred in the theatre. To be a spectator in the Weimar Court Theatre was a position not without its dangers, for if one of the audience forgot himself so far as to hiss, or to laugh in the wrong place, or if he carried his enthusiasm so far as to shout "*Hoch der Verfasser*,"<sup>1</sup> he ran a serious risk of being arrested by the watch, and, if he were not a Weimar subject, of being turned out of the Principality. Thus a member of the audience—a Government official to boot—was once arrested by order of the Duke, because he hissed a poor piece while the Duchess was present in her box ; and on another occasion a journalist who had contributed to a Leipzig newspaper a somewhat unfavourable criticism of Goethe's managerial methods was traced out by the police and banished from the Duchy.

The solemn silence which to this day usually prevails in German theatres during the performance is no doubt a legacy from these classical days in Weimar, for before Goethe's time and outside Weimar German audiences were by no means backward in asserting themselves, or disposed to allow their methods of expressing their feelings to be limited by rule. But even theatrical audiences, intractable as

<sup>1</sup> "Hurrah for the author."



they are apt to be, could not fail to be dominated by Goethe's forceful personality. At the first performance of Friedrich von Schlegel's *Alarcos*,<sup>1</sup> on the success of which Goethe had staked a good deal, though he himself did not think it a good play, the audience misunderstood the situation and laughed loudly at the most serious passages. At this Goethe was furious. Looking out over the assemblage, with his great brown eyes blazing with wrath, he shouted in a voice of thunder: "Man lache nicht!"<sup>2</sup> On several other occasions when the public did something to displease him, he apostrophized them in similar terms, and they bowed to the despotic will of this tamer of wild beasts without a murmur or a word of complaint.

#### IV

Christiane Neumann and Goethe—Amalie Malcolmi and P. A. Wolff—Goethe and the dramas of Schiller—Schiller joins the management of the Weimar Theatre—Schiller as producer.

GOETHE often found his position as Director of the theatre exceedingly wearisome, and he tried repeatedly to be quit of it. But, though it was purely honorary, he could not relinquish it against the wishes of the Duke. Early in his management he writes to Kirms: "Neither from above nor from below can we look for the least gratitude for all our exertions, and in fact I see more and more clearly every day that the whole position is most unsuitable, particularly for me."

Almost the only tie of inclination that bound him to the theatre at first was his interest in the young actress, Christiane Neumann. Genast, the actor and stage-manager referred to above, remarks: "Goethe certainly attended rehearsals now and then, particularly when the piece was of acknowledged merit, and on these occasions he expressed his opinions as to the conception of the characters, and might also indicate the time in which the dialogue, whether in comedy

<sup>1</sup> Fr. von Schlegel's *Alarcos*, in which the author had made an unsuccessful attempt to present a modern romantic theme in the guise of classical tragedy, was produced on the 2nd January, 1802.

<sup>2</sup> "No laughing!"



or tragedy, should be taken; but he specially concerned himself only with the little fourteen-year-old Neumann."

She was a charming young girl, in years little more than a child,<sup>1</sup> when Goethe was appointed Director, but even then she was a fully developed young maiden, one of those delicate flowers which now and then shoot up in the hot-bed of the theatre, full of colour and perfume, unconscious of their artistic powers, unfolding all too early into rich and brilliant life, only to wither away again all too soon. Such a one had been Charlotte Ackermann,<sup>2</sup> so famous throughout Germany thirty years before, and such was now the little Christiane, Goethe's favourite. At the age of fourteen she married the comic actor, Becker, afterwards stage-manager; at seventeen she was already the mother of two children; at nineteen she died. She acted in *Die Jäger*, the very first production of the new management, taking the part of the lazy inn-servant Bärbel. But she was soon promoted to much more important tasks, and before her short life ended was playing such parts as Emilia Galotti, Minna von Barnhelm, the Countess Eboli, Ophelia, Amalie (in *Die Räuber*) and Luise (in *Kabale und Liebe*). Apart from her rare grace and charm, her strength lay in her invariable perfect simplicity and naturalness<sup>3</sup>—this, too, is a gift that we find constantly recurring in these rare, delicate flowers of the theatre, who, having grown up in an atmosphere of theatrical artifice, seem immune to its contagion; and that this was the case proves sufficiently that Goethe *could* allow native talent to unfold itself in accordance with its natural bent, and that his system of drill did not always keep down the fresh shoots of individuality. She soon became the acknowledged favourite of the Weimar public, a little theatrical pet, and the prologues and epilogues at that time so much in vogue had always to be spoken by her.

<sup>1</sup> Christiane Neumann was born 15th December 1778. She was thus not yet thirteen when Goethe's management began. Her father had recently died.

<sup>2</sup> See vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), pp. 158-160.

<sup>3</sup> Iffland, who had often played with her during his starring visit in 1796, said of her: "All things are possible to her, for she will never succumb to the artificial intoxication of sentimentality, the disease which is so ruinous to our young actresses."



Goethe compassed her about with what A. W. Schlegel afterwards described, with a touch of irony, as 'a picturesque fatherliness,' behind which is clearly discernible, not only his openly acknowledged interest in her powers as an actress, but also the passionate feeling, with difficulty repressed, of a still youthful and vigorous man of ardent temperament. As an old man Goethe acknowledged, freely and honestly, that the most dangerous temptation which had assailed him as Director of a theatre had come from the young women with whom his position brought him in contact. Speaking to Eckermann, when seventy-six years old, he says: "There was no lack in our theatre of women who were not only young and beautiful, but also possessed of great charm of soul. I felt myself passionately attracted to more than one of them; and a disposition to meet me half-way was not wanting. But I took firm hold of myself and said: '*No further.*' I knew my position and what I owed to it. I was there not as a private individual, but as the head of an institution the welfare of which was of more importance to me than any temporary happiness of my own. If I had been entangled in any love affair, I should have been like a compass which cannot possibly point true because a magnet close by is deflecting it." We cannot doubt that, when speaking these words, he was thinking, among others, of Christiane Neumann.

A little episode in which she was concerned shows a side of him totally different from the strictly official one which was ordinarily in evidence in his dealings with the theatre. The first part of any importance which Christiane played under Goethe's direction was Prince Arthur in Shakespeare's *King John*. In the moving scene in the fourth act, in which Hubert is to put out the young Prince's eyes with a red-hot iron, Goethe could not get the little actress to show enough terror. At last he seized the iron himself and rushed at her with such a terrifying expression that she trembled and sank down fainting. Much concerned at this, Goethe took her in his arms, carried her off and tried to revive her with affectionate words. The little actress, mature beyond her age, soon came to herself,

but, filled with delighted surprise at finding this great, much-dreaded man so tender and kind, she lay quite still for a time in his arms, till at last she opened her eyes, kissed his hand, and offered him her fresh lips to kiss.

The poet has left an imperishable memorial of this flower, too early faded, in his beautiful elegy, *Euphrosyne*.<sup>1</sup> When she died, of an affection of the lungs which her constitution, undermined by early child-bearing, was too feeble to resist, he was absent on a journey, and he wrote of her death to Böttiger, a man who as a rule was uncongenial to him: "She was dear to me in more senses than one. Whenever the declining impulse towards theatrical work revived in me, as it did now and then, it was always she that I had before my eyes; and my figures of girls and young women were modelled on her and her qualities. There may be greater talents, but none to me more charming."

Artistically, Christiane Neumann-Becker was the bright spot in the first period of the Weimar Theatre. Her successor was the actor Malcolmi's youngest daughter, Amalie, who at the time of Christiane's death was a handsome, rather giddy young girl of seventeen. Goethe found her an apt and pliable subject for his instruction, and, in spite of her gay, pleasure-loving disposition, she soon became the leading tragédienne of the theatre, being marked out for this line by her fine, well-developed figure and her rich mezzo-soprano voice,<sup>2</sup> rather than by any tragic strain in her temperament. When she was only twenty-three she played, to Goethe's satisfaction, the part of the Princess Isabella in Schiller's *Brant von Messina*, a rôle that is usually reserved for mature actresses in the 'heroic mother' line of parts. Other parts in which her acting earned her great triumphs at Weimar—outside Goethe's Principality it hardly stood the test so well—

<sup>1</sup> The last part played by Christiane Neumann-Becker, or at least the last in which Goethe saw her, was *Euphrosyne*, in Weigl's *Petermännchen*. She died on the 22nd September 1797. Goethe himself tells the story of the Hubert-Arthur episode in his elegy.

<sup>2</sup> Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* was one of her parts. Amalie Malcolmi was born in 1780 and died in 1851.



were Iphigenia, Antigone, Ophelia, and the Countess Eboli.

Rapid as was her development to maturity in her profession, her erotic life developed no less quickly. Before she was twenty-four she had been thrice married; first, in 1802, to an actor named Julius Miller<sup>1</sup>; next, in 1803, to the stage-manager Becker, who had been Christiane Neumann's husband; and finally, in 1804, to Pius Alexander Wolff, an estimable young man who had come to Weimar in 1803, and who became Goethe's favourite pupil among the men of the company. He divided with Vohs, who seems to have had more talent than he, but less correctness of style, the 'line' of 'principal lovers,' playing these parts with much classic grace, and in later years he and his wife carried Goethe's doctrine abroad into the world outside the Duchy.<sup>2</sup>

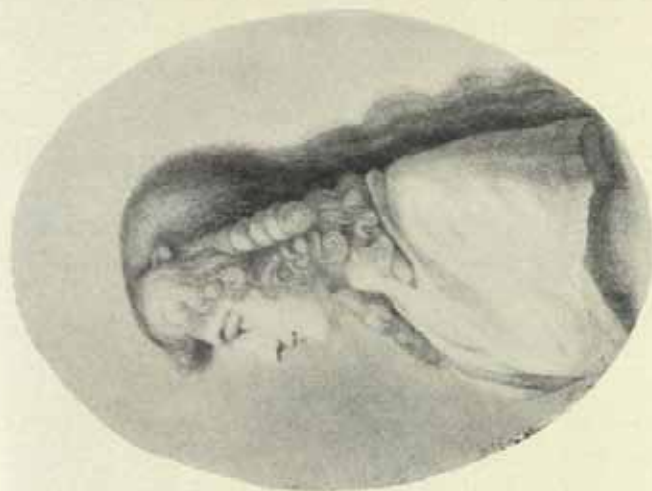
As we have said, Goethe's attitude towards his duties, during the first seven years of his management, was marked by not a little indifference. He took part now and then in the administrative and instructional work, but often absented himself from the theatre and the State for considerable periods, and never adopted any definite personal standpoint with regard to theatrical art in general. He knew, indeed, exceedingly little about it. Except on the occasion of the amateur performance in which he had had the fortune to play with old Ekhof, a master in the craft, he had never in his life, either at home or abroad, seen a really great actor play. When Iffland came to Weimar on his famous starring engagement in 1796, Goethe was keenly interested. His taste for things theatrical was quickened, and—a strange enough trait in one whose own pupils were trained to be as uniform as a row of pins—what attracted him most in Iffland's playing was its many-sided virtuosity

<sup>1</sup> Some maintain, indeed, that her marriage to Miller was merely an invention of Goethe's. It is said that a slight indiscretion on her part led to her having to remain absent from the theatre for some months, that on her return, Goethe, in the exercise of his sovereign powers, decreed that she should be called Madame Miller, and that she was so called accordingly, until she married Becker the year after.

<sup>2</sup> They remained at Weimar till 1816, and then joined the Berlin theatre, under the management of Count Brühl, Iffland's successor. P. A. Wolff played in Berlin till his death in 1828, and Amalie Wolff till her retirement in 1841.



63.—Amalie Wolff (p. 255).



64.—Christiane Neumann-Becker  
(p. 253).





and variety. The fact that Iffland played during this short visit fourteen widely differing parts struck him with admiration. In his heart, indeed, he had no taste for the class of performers who merely exploited their own personality. As he makes Jarno say in *Wilhelm Meister*: "He who can only act himself, is no actor."

Though he held up Iffland to his company as the great model they should imitate, his admiration for him had no influence upon his own methods of instruction, and his ideas of the actor's art soon settled down into the view, which he never afterwards altered, that it was to be regarded as the instrument of the dramatic author and nothing more. But it was not long before a complete change took place in his feeling for the theatre as a whole. This change, which was to bring forth the great days that made Weimar famous, came about when Schiller joined the direction of the theatre, and the two great poets began to work together on that little stage.

The immediate occasion was the reconstruction of the theatre building in 1798, and Goethe's wish to celebrate the opening of the new theatre by the production of Schiller's *Wallenstein's Lager*,<sup>1</sup> then just completed. Goethe threw himself into the staging and rehearsal of the piece with the greatest ardour, in constant consultation with Schiller, who was then living in Jena, quite close by; and the brilliant motley scenes, with their swarm of finely imagined minor figures—scenes which are like the letterpress to a camp-picture by Callot—called forth all his powers as stage-manager at their very best.

It is probable that Goethe contributed nothing really new to theatrical art, considered as a representation of human life, and certain that he introduced nothing better than had already been attained in the eighteenth century by such great performers as Garrick and Friedrich Ludwig Schröder among realistic actors, and Mrs Siddons and Talma in the classical style. But to scenic art as a whole he did communicate a new impulse, by striving to make it pictorially illustrative, seeking on the one hand

<sup>1</sup> *Wallenstein's Camp*.



to subordinate it to the other arts, and on the other to enrich it with elements derived from them.

What Richard Wagner in later years conceived, and in some measure realized, as the ideal form for opera—an art-form built up from a harmonious blending of music, dramatic representation and pictorial art—Goethe too evidently had floating in his mind, and his want of success in realizing his conception was in all probability due to the extreme poverty of the materials, musical, pictorial and histrionic, with which he had to work. The attempt to introduce this lyric-pictorial element into scenic art, which has considerable attractions for a theatrical director—and which became so prevalent in the nineteenth century as to come near smothering the element of drama proper, the representation of human life—was at the end of the eighteenth century something quite new, so far at least as the spoken drama was concerned. And Goethe found in Schiller's later plays—he did not make so much account of the earlier ones—the strongest incentive and the best support for his endeavours. This was particularly true of *Wallenstein's Lager*, which might have been specially created on purpose to be treated on these lyric-pictorial lines.

Departing from his previous attitude to rehearsals, Goethe now exerted himself untiringly to produce the correct stage-picture. With a view to obtaining ideas for stage arrangements and costumes, he adopted a method of procedure much in vogue in later times, but then quite unknown to the German stage, getting together a collection of all sorts of wood-cuts, etc., representing scenes of the Thirty Years' War, and even carrying off an old stove-plate, with a seventeenth-century camp-scene embossed on it, from a public-house at Jena.<sup>1</sup> No small part of the play itself came into being, so to speak, on the stage itself. For example, the part of the Capuchin monk did not exist in Schiller's original manuscript, but was inserted during the rehearsals. The original exposition, too, did not satisfy Goethe, and he asked for a soldiers' song to open the play. Schiller at once wrote four verses; but these were not enough for Goethe, who added three more.

<sup>1</sup> Genast: *Classical and post-classical times at Weimar*.

The first verse<sup>1</sup> was to be sung before the rise of the curtain, to put the audience in the appropriate mood; the fourth and fifth were sung behind the scenes, to indicate that the camp stretched far beyond the wings—a quite modern device this also—while all those on the stage joined in the refrain. These and other effects of the kind, together with the picturesque groupings on the stage, produced an immense and unaccustomed impression on the public, and Schiller was enchanted with the performance, which completely realized his intentions. The next year both *Die Piccolomini* and *Wallensteins Tod*<sup>2</sup> were produced with similar success, and these performances, the fame of which spread far beyond the boundaries of the little Duchy and brought people flocking to Weimar merely to see *Wallenstein*, led on to that partnership of the two great poets in dramatic production which, brief as it was, proved of such unique importance. Schiller now settled permanently in Weimar, and in 1800 was appointed, at Goethe's request, a permanent member of the managing body; and the pair set to work to use the theatre as a sort of artistic laboratory, where, in the struggle to work out their ideas, they carried out all sorts of literary experiments, often of a very bizarre kind, and observed critically the remarkable results produced.

The first and most important of these results was the creation of those noble gems of poetry, the literary crown-

<sup>1</sup> It ran as follows:

Es leben die Soldaten,  
Der Bauer giebt den Braten,  
Der Gärtner giebt den Most,  
Das ist Soldatenkost!  
Trada la la la la!

(Hurrah, hurrah for the soldiers!  
The farmer gives the fat roast,  
The gardener gives the wine—  
That is the soldiers' fare!  
Tra da la la la la).

The stage-manager, Anton Genast, has recorded these details. He quotes all seven verses of the soldiers' song, which is not printed in Schiller's Works. The last verse, written by Goethe, runs thus:

Es heisst bei unsern Festen:  
Gestohlnes schmeckt am besten,  
Unrechtes Gut macht fett,  
Das ist Soldateng' bet!  
Trada la la la la la!

(At all our feasts the word is:  
Things stolen taste the sweetest,  
Unrighteous goods make fat—  
That is the soldiers' creed!  
Tra da la la la la la).

<sup>2</sup> *Wallenstein's Camp*, *The Piccolomini*, and *The Death of Wallenstein* are the three parts of Schiller's *Wallenstein* trilogy. (Trans. note.)



jewels of the nation, which made Schiller the best-loved poet of Germany: the *Wallenstein* trilogy, and following on it *Maria Stuart*, *Die Braut von Messina*, *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* and *Wilhelm Tell*.

Goethe's contribution in the shape of original dramatic poetry was a much smaller one. Indeed his *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, in its final form, may be said to have been his only contribution of importance, and his pieces did not achieve anything like the success of Schiller's. But the two poets were far from confining their work to the production of their own plays. They experimented freely and boldly with every form of dramatic art: ancient Greek tragedy, with its choruses, was revived, first in *Die Braut von Messina* and later in Sophocles' *Antigone*; their productions leaped boldly from Roman Comedy (Plautus and Terence, performed in masks) to Gozzi's revival of the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*, from Shakespeare to classic French tragedy (Corneille, Racine and Voltaire), from the Spanish drama (Calderón) to the new Romantic school (Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel).

It is a remarkable fact, however, that alongside of all these activities, aimed at making the theatre a sort of institute for the higher literary culture, we find the bulk of the repertory still consisting of the ordinary popular drama of the day. On examining the list of productions at the Weimar theatre under Goethe's management, we find, to our surprise, that the author whose works come easily first in number of performances is—Kotzebue; Kotzebue, the much despised (by Schiller in particular), the now almost forgotten, has to his credit 600 performances, or over one-seventh,<sup>1</sup> out of the total of 4136 performances given under Goethe's management, while Schiller was performed no more than 361 times, and Goethe himself only attained to 238 performances. Which proves that the most highly cultured management, however ideal its aims, and however ample the powers with which it is furnished, is

<sup>1</sup> While Goethe thus opened his theatre very freely to Kotzebue's work, he kept his own door inexorably shut against the author himself, who never succeeded in gaining admission to Goethe's circle.

powerless to exclude from a theatre the popular literary tastes of the day.

All the more honourable was it, then, to Goethe and Schiller that in very many cases they defied the current popular taste, and managed to force the acceptance by reluctant audiences of good and genuine dramatic literature, instead of swimming with the current and caring only for their own popularity. Nor can there be any dispute as to the importance to literature of the great days at Weimar. In the work of these two men German poetry attained to a plenitude and power which it has never surpassed, and their co-operation was, as it were, symbolic of the fulfilment of all the dreams, the longings and the strivings of the eighteenth century.

The benefits conferred by their management on *theatrical art* are, as we shall see, much more questionable.

In their personal relations with the members of the company Goethe and Schiller were exceedingly unlike. Goethe's Olympian-bureaucratic formality, his curt, imperious, categorical method of dealing with the players, contrasted sharply with Schiller's uniform good-nature and amiable readiness to make the best of things. Going about among the theatre people, a tall, rather angular figure, eagerly explaining things to them in his quaint, good-hearted Swabian speech, easily roused to enthusiasm, but hardly ever to anger,<sup>1</sup> the younger poet won the hearts of all, and was soon as much loved as Goethe was feared.

Often, by intervening as peacemaker, he would succeed in averting the consequences of Goethe's severe, abrupt decisions. Anton Genast, in his recollections, gives an instance of this which brings out very characteristically the difference between the two poets.

*Macbeth* was to be played, in Schiller's adaptation, and Vohs, the best 'hero' the theatre could produce, was cast for the title-rôle. He was popular with the public and was by no means without talent, but was a bad 'study,' and touchy and irritable under reproof. He had been particularly careless in studying *Macbeth*, and when the

<sup>1</sup> Cp. vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), p. 201, Note.



dress-rehearsal came he proved to be still very much at sea in Schiller's verses.

Goethe and Schiller were sitting together in the parquet, and the Olympian soon became furious. After the second act his dreaded voice was heard calling to the stage-manager, who was on the stage: "Herr G'nast!<sup>1</sup> Be good enough to come down here to me!" When Genast had obeyed he went on angrily: "What is this Herr Vohs about? The man does not know a word of his part; how can he possibly play Macbeth? You will cancel to-morrow's performance, and you need make no secret of the reason either to Herr Vohs or to the rest of the company."

On this Schiller intervened to soothe Goethe's wrath and plead Vohs's cause, saying that his conception of the character was excellent, and his inspiration might be trusted to carry him through safely on the night. At last he managed to pacify Goethe, who had quitted his seat and was on the point of leaving the theatre.

The night came, and Vohs mangled his lines terribly, but nevertheless carried the house with him and was warmly applauded. Goethe did not deign to show himself behind the scenes; but after the second Act Schiller came behind and asked in his amiable Swabian: "Wo ischt der Vohs?"<sup>2</sup> Vohs came up to him with some hesitation, his evil conscience making him expect a severe reprimand. But Schiller embraced him warmly, exclaiming: "Nein Vohs! ich muss Ihne sage: meischterhaft! meischterhaft! Aber nun ziehe Sie sich zum dritte Act um!"<sup>3</sup> Vohs was deeply touched by the poet's unselfish forbearance, and thanked him heartily. But Schiller turned to the stage-manager and whispered: "Sehe Sie, Genascht, wir habbe recht gehabt! Er hat zwar ganz andere Vers gesproche, als ich geschriebe hab, aber er ischt trefflich!"<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It was thus he was in the habit of pronouncing the worthy Anton Genast's name.

<sup>2</sup> "Where is Vohs?"

<sup>3</sup> "Why Vohs! I must say: it's masterly! masterly! But now you must change for the third Act!"

<sup>4</sup> "You see, Genast, we were quite right! Of course the lines he spoke were quite different from the ones I wrote; but he is excellent!"



But while Goethe and Schiller were so completely unlike in their methods of dealing with the actors, their theoretical views on the theatre and theatrical art were in remarkably close accord.

Of the two, Goethe was the more open to outside influences, the one less wedded to his own point of view. Schiller clung to his theories with the fanatical tenacity of the idealist, while, on the other hand, Goethe was capable of carrying out in practice theories once adopted with a ruthless consistency quite foreign to the character of his friend.

Goethe's view of theatrical matters underwent a marked change under Schiller's influence. Beginning as an opportunist, who regarded the theatre from a business standpoint and was comparatively indifferent, or at least untroubled by importunate theories and ideals, in questions of theatrical art,<sup>1</sup> he became by degrees a convert to Schiller's severe æsthetic idealism.

Now Schiller's theories of histrionic art have, like most theories, a good deal to be said for them, but when carried out in practice they are capable of producing, and did actually produce, the most discouraging results. Put as briefly as possible they were these: Two things are required of the actor in his impersonations—truth and beauty. Truth does not come by nature, but is attained solely by art; beauty, on the other hand, depends entirely on innate natural disposition, and cannot be acquired by art.

But how, asks Schiller, can the actor attain to this beauty in his impersonations, since it cannot be learnt? His answer is: "A man must first see to it that the humanity in his soul ripens to maturity, and then, if such is his vocation, proceed to give it expression on the stage." But by 'humanity' he does not mean fortuitous, individual human nature, but the idealized, liberated spirit—the "beautiful soul."

Schiller took up a position directly opposed to the conception of theatrical art then current in Germany,

<sup>1</sup> Writing in 1791 he says: "A Director plays everything without picking and choosing; things that fail, will at least have filled up an evening; things that survive, he will make careful use of."



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according to which naturalness, lifelikeness, reality were all in all. This was the foundation on which the theories of Schröder, Iffland and their disciples were built. Schiller, on his part, wanted truth indeed, but for him—as for John Philip Kemble—truth did not mean naturalness; what he wanted was a higher, idealized truth, answering to a higher, idealized humanity, not the accurate expression of positive, actually existing, individual human nature.

All this, as theory, was well enough. And if Goethe had patted his friend on the shoulder and said, with his own Mephistopheles:

Grau, theurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,  
Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum,<sup>1</sup>

and had then proceeded to give this laudable theory a really artistic practical embodiment, it would have been better still.

Instead, the two friends set to work to eliminate systematically the modest share of the healthy sense of reality that had been infused into the mediocrities of the Weimar theatre by the rationally objective tendencies of the previous years, and to introduce a meretricious technique of stilted declamation and unnatural attitude and gesture, which was, in reality, much further from any ideal conception of beauty than was the sincere, if somewhat petty, naturalism it replaced.

In his early youth, as we know, Schiller had wished to go on the stage, but, as he had no natural gifts for acting, he had to give up the idea. He retained, however, a great fondness for declaiming and reciting verse,<sup>2</sup> and in rehearsing with the Weimar actors he would often play a scene himself, to show them how he wished to have things done. In declaiming verse he greatly affected the strongly rhythmical style of delivery deriving in Germany from the time of Gottsched, which might be defended, at a pinch, in the case of the French alexandrines—though even in these Talma had already introduced a freer style

<sup>1</sup> "Dear friend, all theory is gray—  
The golden tree of life is green."

<sup>2</sup> See vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), pp. 200-201.

—but which was very ill-suited to his own iambic verse ; while, equally with Goethe himself, he was addicted to the turgid, over-pathetic manner, which seems to be a peculiarity of most poets in reading or recitation. He was particularly fond of flinging forth the last lines of a tirade with an unmeasured bombastic vigour, which in his case was specially ineffective, by reason of his marked Swabian accent and his angular, bony figure.

As stage-manager he loved to emphasize all the glaring, ultra-theatrical effects ; a predilection which comes out clearly in the stage-directions of his own pieces. When Ferdinand, in *Kabale und Liebe*, has given his Louise the poisoned draught of lemonade, "he turns away, suddenly deadly pale, and then rushes into the farthest corner of the room." Further on he stands "rigid as a statue, rooted to the earth, in a long deathly pause," and finally "falls to the ground as though struck by lightning." His characters, especially in his earlier plays, are constantly "starting up in fearful agitation," "sinking into gloomy thought," "standing with a rigid gaze," "speaking with terrible scorn," "laughing with a fearful laughter," "audaciously gnashing their teeth as they gaze towards Heaven"—in short everything, facial expression, attitude, movement, is overcharged with a demonstrative, theatrical passion verging on absurdity. This tendency was, indeed, considerably modified for the better by his intercourse and co-operation with Goethe, whose taste lay in the direction of restraint and dignity in movement and gesture. But his weakness for strong, glaring effects clung to Schiller even in his later years, and in his work as stage-manager he never quite got rid of his rather childish love of melodrama.

Along with this undeniable tendency to bombast and exaggeration, however, Schiller brought to the theatre a breath of vivifying enthusiasm, and inspired in the actors a feeling of the dignity of their calling, which in that age, in which theatrical art was so coolly and prosaically regarded, were of eminent service. Thus the years during which the direction of the Weimar stage was in his hands—for Goethe, usually so tenacious of his own opinions,



was strangely ready to defer to Schiller's views—were beyond comparison the brightest period in the theatre's history. From one point of view, indeed, the two great poets exercised a depressing influence on theatrical art, for under their management the necessary balance between the function of the dramatic poet and that of his interpreters on the stage was not maintained. Nevertheless some rays of the glory the two heroes shed around them fell upon and illumined the little stage and its poor players.

## V

Goethe as sole Director—Defects of the Weimar School—The opposition to Goethe—Caroline Jagemann, the Duke's mistress—The performing poodle—Goethe's retirement.

WITH Schiller's premature death (1805) and Goethe's assumption of the sole direction, the theatre entered on its third period.

Under Schiller's influence, Goethe's interest in the theatre had revived, and he had arrived at a definite guiding principle for theatrical art. Put in his own laconic fashion it ran: "*Erst schön, dann wahr.*"<sup>1</sup> To Goethe, as to Schiller, beauty on the stage meant a style whose aim was the Ideal. But while enthusiasm, passion, fire, were inseparable elements in Schiller's ideal, in Goethe's, harmony, grace, elevation, took their place. The training his actors were put through was so sedulously aimed at beauty, that he never succeeded in bringing them into touch with truth.

His theory, based on the principle that actors should never, from a mistaken striving after naturalness, play to each other as if no third person were present, that harmony was everything, illusion nothing, was carried out by him in practice with inflexible consistency. He drilled his actors like a regiment of soldiers, until they could all recite equally well in strict accordance with his rules; so that the declamation of verse became a sort of musical performance, identical for all characters, uniform

<sup>1</sup> "Beauty first; then truth."





management. Schröder's biographer, F. L. W. Meyer, for instance, who witnessed a performance of *Wilhelm Tell* at Lauchstädt in 1810, has some remarks which are very much to the point: "If," he says, "'ensemble' is to be taken to mean, that all the ladies and gentlemen might just as well have changed parts, as any one of them would have played any part pretty much like any other—then one can't deny that this company possesses 'ensemble.' . . . To them statuesque posturing seems to stand for plastic acting."

In literary and æsthetic significance Goethe's management had no parallel in the Germany of that day. But in respect to acting pure and simple it was infinitely inferior to Schröder's management of the Hamburg theatre, and its tendency was almost entirely reactionary. Nevertheless it was precisely upon the art of acting in Germany that the Weimar School exercised a fateful influence, not indeed on the artists of great talent, for they were able, as they always are, to go their own way in spite of theories and schools, but on the mediocrities—for whom, to be sure, it was intended. Its empty, monotonous, but sonorous declamation, and generalized, plastic style of gesture furnished a convenient shelter for dullness, and idealism became an effective battle-cry wherewith to confound the wicked naturalists. To this day the after-effects of Goethe's schooling are clearly traceable in German acting, and anyone who has attended a performance in the unadulterated classic style at a third-rate Court theatre will feel a lively sympathy for the well-disciplined Weimar public in the trials to which it was exposed.

But while Goethe had thus been conducting his company and his audiences, with an iron hand, to the goal he had set before him once for all as the true one, another element had arisen in the theatre, in dealing with which his hand was strangely lenient, and his usually haughty will bent in a fashion quite unworthy of him.

It is matter of history that Goethe was ousted from the Weimar theatre by a poodle dog. But behind the



65.—Pius Alexander Wolff (p. 255).



66.—Karl August, Duke of Weimar  
(p. 269).



67.—Caroline Jagemann  
(p. 269).





dog there was of course something (or someone) else. "Des Pudels Kern"<sup>1</sup> was in this case a woman.

The Weimar Court Theatre was an Operahouse as well as a playhouse. Grand opera, indeed, was not performed, but French *Opéra comique*, Mozart's operas, and the lighter style of opera in general were frequently given. Goethe had the chief direction of both branches, but did not, as a rule, concern himself much with opera, the practical management of which was left for some years to the stage-manager, Becker. The two branches, however, were to a large extent worked with a single staff, actors who could sing being utilized for opera, while opera-singers who were suitable for ordinary acting were required to appear in drama when necessary. In consequence of this, engagements for the staff of the opera fell within Goethe's province. One of his recruits, engaged in 1797 on Iffland's recommendation, was a beautiful young singer, Caroline Jagemann, who had made a great success at Mannheim.<sup>2</sup> She had much ability both as singer and as actress, especially in comedy and light opera, and Goethe expected great things of her—though hardly, we may suppose, that she would bring his management to an abrupt end, and in part supplant him in the good graces of the Duke. That this nevertheless came about in the fullness of time, was due to the fact that she soon became Karl August's *maîtresse en titre*, bore him several children, and was granted in 1809 a patent of nobility, with the title of Frau von Heygendorf. Her twofold preferment—to the post of Ducal favourite and the ranks of the nobility—did not cause her to retire from the stage, but under its influence her natural love of intrigue and thirst for power developed into a passion which, in its little sphere, produced sufficiently important

\* <sup>1</sup> "Das also war des Pudels Kern" ("So that was the kernel of the poodle") is Faust's exclamation when the poodle which has followed him to his study turns into Mephistopheles. The phrase is currently used as we might say: "So that's what was at the bottom of it." (Trans. note).

Henriette Caroline Friederike Jagemann was, however, a native of Weimar (born 1777), where her father held the post of Court Librarian. The Dowager Duchess, Anna Amalie, had her trained as a singer at Mannheim, where she was very successful. In 1828—after the death of Duke Karl August—she was retired on a pension, and moved to Dresden, where she died in 1848.



results. It was natural and inevitable that war should break out between her and Goethe, and the struggle between his inflexibly autocratic friend and his ungovernable prima-donna-mistress<sup>1</sup> must have given Karl August many difficult and trying hours.

Goethe's existence as Director of the theatre was embittered by a hundred petty feminine pin-pricks, all directly aimed at forcing him to retire. And in fact he did send in his resignation in 1808, after he had been subjected by the Duke to the humiliation described in the note below. But the Duchess and his wife, Christiane, between them persuaded him to remain.

The strange thing is that he was now reluctant to give up the theatre. He had become greatly attached to it as the years went by; he had the feeling that he had set on foot a great work and that he ought to carry it on. He had accepted the post eighteen years before, reluctantly and only out of friendship for the Duke, and he was doubtless unwilling to let himself be driven out of it now by the Duke's mistress. He remained in his post, accordingly—remained on for eight years more, and bore the many indignities offered him, not exactly with humility, but in complete silence. He let Caroline Jagemann and her favourite *basso*, Strohmeier, lord it over the opera as seemed good to them; High Steward Count von Edling, one of the usual incompetent courtier-figureheads, was given him, in 1814, as co-director—Goethe ignored his existence and stayed on; a special position in the theatre (the thing he most abhorred) was created for Demoiselle Jagemann, now Frau von Heygendorf—her favourites were preferred and his dis-

<sup>1</sup> Her caprice and tyranny were overpowering. On the occasion of a performance of Paer's opera *Sargino* in the season of 1808, the tenor, Morhard, reported himself sick, submitting a written notice to that effect, supported by a medical certificate. Caroline Jagemann was furious, and insisted that the performance should take place all the same. "If the hound can't sing," she is reported to have said, "let him bark!—But he *shall* sing." She complained to the Duke, and that much-admired Father of his Country put the hoarse singer under arrest in his home, and issued orders to Goethe, in none too civil terms, to dismiss him without salary from the next week, and have him turned out of the Dukedom within fourteen days. Goethe, though he managed to have this brutal order modified to some extent, took the matter with surprising patience; but of course it left its sting.

missed—Goethe ignored all these humiliations and still stayed on.

Then came the catastrophe.

A certain melodrama had recently been making a sensation in the capitals of Europe, its chief attraction being that one of the principal parts was played by a performing dog, which, among other feats, rescued a child from drowning. The piece had now reached Germany, and a man called Kasper was touring round the principal towns with a trained poodle to fill this 'star' part.

The Duke, who was a dog-lover, was anxious to see the beast's tricks, and desired that the piece should be produced and the poodle engaged to perform in it. A proposal more sacrilegious in Goethe's eyes could hardly have been devised, and when Karl August put it forward, he replied in his loftiest manner: "It is distinctly laid down in the Regulations of the Theatre that no dogs are to be brought on to the stage"—and at once left for Jena.

In spite of this rebuff, however, the Duke, egged on by his mistress, decided that *Aubry de Montdidier's Dog, or the Forest of Bondy*—such was the name of the dog-drama—should be produced; and, though Goethe publicly declared, after the first rehearsal, that he could have nothing more to do with a theatre in which a dog had appeared, on the 12th April 1817 the scandalous performance duly took place on Weimar's classic boards, amid the clearly-expressed disapproval of the public. On the same day Goethe sent in his final resignation, and received its acceptance by return. He never again set foot inside his old theatre, and, as was inevitable when the great light-bearer had departed, it quickly sank into the darkness of indifference and disesteem.

There was a touch of grim retributive justice in what had now befallen Goethe. He, who had always relied on his unlimited favour with his Prince to support his despotic government of the theatre, was now brought low by the caprices of that Prince's mistress; he, to whom all his life long the actor's art meant little more than drill and training, now found himself driven from the field by a drilled and trained poodle. And yet, whatever the defects of his



theatrical management, it was worthy of far better things than the ludicrous end that befell it, and the manner of its ending must stand as a lasting reproach to the Prince who, to indulge his mistress's whim and his own taste for circus-tricks, was capable of inflicting humiliation on a great man who was his best friend.

In shaking the dust of the theatre from his feet, Goethe did not refrain from leaving behind him a bitter word of farewell. He writes to his intimate friend Riemer: "Happy the man who can leap clear of a carriage that is plunging down a mountain-side. I can do this, and I mean to turn my back on a path by which the fitting elevation could never be attained—least of all through the theatre, since the present actors are altogether wanting in life and art, seriousness and vigorous power of apprehension. They are a womanish race, and a woman's rule is what suits them best."

They had their deserts. Caroline Jagemann's friend, the *basso* Strohmeier, was appointed to Goethe's office, but she herself was the real inheritor of his powers.

And meanwhile Goethe went his way, following his lonely, strenuous path, upward towards the peaks.

## THE ROMANTIC SCHOOL

### I

The relations of the German Romantic School with the stage—Ludwig Tieck and his plays—The Drama of Fate—Zacharias Werner's *The Twenty-fourth of February*—Play manufacturers.

IN 1811 one of the apostles of the new school, August Wilhelm Schlegel, wrote: "The repertory of our stage offers in its miserable abundance a motley miscellany of dramas of chivalry, domestic pictures, and dramas of sentiment, which seldom gives place to works in the larger, more cultured style, to Shakespeare or Schiller. Translations and adaptations of foreign novelties, however, particularly of French farces<sup>1</sup> and operettas, form an indispensable part of it. The intrinsic value of the plays is so small that their attraction for the spectators consists entirely in the fleeting charm of novelty, a condition of things most injurious to the art of acting, since a multitude of worthless parts have to be learnt and rehearsed in a hurry, to be forgotten again as quickly."<sup>2</sup> He sums up his judgment of theatrical conditions in Germany by describing them as "a chaotic anarchy."

This picture cannot be said to be overcharged, but still less can it be maintained that the contributions made to the drama by the poets of the new Romantic School helped in any way to render the conditions less chaotic. This was not from want of zeal, for a large share of their effort was specially directed to the theatre, but from sheer lack of dramatic power.

German Romanticism, as a literary tendency, was, altogether, much less fortunate in its conditions than the

<sup>1</sup> In the original: "Nachspiele" (afterpieces).

<sup>2</sup> A. W. Schlegel: *Ueber dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (*On Dramatic Art and Literature*). Heidelberg, 1811. III. 240.



similar movement which developed in France a little later. The war waged by the young French Romanticists was a natural and necessary revolt against a petrified, dessicated literary form, which had long outlived its vigour, and was a mere bloodless survival from the great century, long gone by, in which it originated. In France there was a real, essential difference between Classicism, tenacious of life, though no longer fit to live, and the young, fresh, full-blooded Romanticism which assailed it.

But the conditions in Germany were totally different. There Romanticism emerged just as the poetic genius of the nation had reached its highest development in Goethe and Schiller. The works of both these men were as fresh and new as possible, indeed one of them, Goethe, was in the midst of his period of most vigorous development. There was no mummy-like incubus of Classicism to revolt against—Romanticism as a militant poetic school was so far from being natural and necessary, that it would be nearer the mark to call it an absurdity. And in fact it was not a spontaneous growth in the minds of the poets, but a graft budded on to them in the lecture-room; for it originated from a movement in theoretic philosophy, which, as such, was presumably justifiable as a natural and necessary reaction against materialism and rationalism, but was not primarily concerned with æsthetics. It was perhaps characteristic of the German nation that the younger generation of poets should seek their inspiration in philosophic theory. But, particularly when we keep in view the nature of the Romantic ideals—communion with Nature and her secrets, the solitude of forests, the life of flowers, the mystical transition-states between dreams and reality, night-thoughts, and lonely, brooding melancholy—we can well understand why the study of Fichte's subjectivism, the nature-philosophy of Schelling and his imitator Steffens, and Schubert's mysticism, set forth by brilliant, eloquent men in crowded lecture-halls and afterwards copiously discussed in literary salons, yielded a poetic product more wordy and less fresh and spontaneous, more scholastically literary and less spiritually characteristic, than that which resulted from the similar movements in other countries.

Compare, for instance, the preface to Victor Hugo's *Cromwell*, which sets forth the programme of the young French Romanticists, with Friedrich von Schlegel's eulogy, published in the *Athenæum*<sup>1</sup> about thirty years earlier, of the new poetry which he and his Jena associates were going to produce. Hugo's pronouncement, though long-winded enough, is manly, firm, clear-cut, aimed at a definite object and definite opponents, penetrated with the consciousness that the writer is himself a poet, can himself practise as well as preach; while Schlegel's programme is a mere hotch-potch of would-be-philosophic phrases, reminding us a good deal of the advertisement of a pseudo-scientific nostrum. "Romantic poetry," we read, "is a progressive universal-poetry. Its object is not only to reunite all the separate varieties of poetry, and to connect poetry with philosophy and rhetoric. It must and will, moreover, now mingle, now interfuse poetry and prose, genius and criticism, art-poetry and nature-poetry, make poetry living and sociable and life and society poetic, poetize wit, fill the forms of Art to repletion with genuine culture-substance of every description, and animate them with the uplift of humour.

"It" (poetry) "is alone infinite, as it alone is free, and it recognizes as its first law that the requirements of the poet's calling are subject to no superior law. Romantic poetry is the only species of poetry which is more than a species, which is as it were the very art of poetry itself, for in a certain sense all poetry is, or should be, romantic."

Wilful and unnecessary obscurity, obscurity erected into a principle, is singularly out of place in dramatic art generally, and above all in drama meant for the stage as it actually exists in the world. And though the founders of the Romantic School were keenly interested in the theatre—A. W. Schlegel's principal work was his collection of lectures *On Dramatic Art and Literature*; Ludwig Tieck was devoted, all his life long, to the theatre and theatrical art; Friedrich Schlegel had no greater ambition than to outdo Schiller, as well as jeer at him—no one of them

<sup>1</sup> A literary periodical published by the brothers Schlegel. (Trans. note.)



succeeded in writing a single play that made any mark on the stage. True, each of the two Schlegel brothers did produce a drama of a sort, August Wilhelm his *Ion* and Friedrich his *Alarcos*, and Goethe, good-natured, and not quite insensible to flattery, was induced to admit both plays to the Weimar stage; but the result merely was to prove to demonstration, firstly, the almost equal impotence of both brothers in drama, and second, how loosely their romantic ideas hung about them; for *Ion* was merely an old-time classical *pasticcio*, while in *Alarcos* a theme taken from Spanish romance was worked out in classical form.

Tieck's case was somewhat different. He was looked upon as the dramatist of the school, and he himself in particular doubtless believed himself destined to be a great dramatic poet and theatrical reformer. That he never became either one or the other was not due either to lack of dramatic talent, or to any failure of fidelity to his romantic principles in his work as a dramatist.

The Schlegel brothers were merely the theorists of the movement, the apostles of the creed; they showed the way to others, without following it themselves; every attempt they made at independent creation on romantic lines miscarried, partly because their poetic gifts were essentially derivative and second-hand, but also, in part, because they were not genuine Romantics in temperament. Tieck, on the other hand, had both a genuinely romantic temper and a true poetic gift. The bane of dramatic production in his case seems clearly to have been his too persistent adherence to the Romantic programme. He felt the utmost contempt for the form of drama in vogue in his day, and for the prevailing theatrical conditions as a whole, but though he sought all his life for new and improved forms, not only for the drama itself but also for the theatre and the conditions of theatrical art, he never succeeded in finding them. From his earliest youth<sup>1</sup> he had interested himself in theatrical matters; in amateur

<sup>1</sup> Johann Ludwig Tieck was born 31st May 1773 in Berlin. He was the son of a capable master-craftsman (a rope-maker), but was given a good classical education and came, at an early age, under markedly literary influences.

performances at Reichardt's<sup>1</sup> house in Berlin he had showed marked talent as an actor, and later developed this talent to a high degree of accomplishment, not as a professional player, but as a dramatic reader. At the age of four and twenty he wrote his blood-stained tragedy of *Destiny, Karl von Berneck*—a sort of modern Oresteia, full of spirits, portents, and distraught melancholy. After a course of Shakespearean, pre-Shakespearean, and mediæval drama, he persuaded himself that he had found, in the apparent formlessness of the drama of the past, the form most suited to the romantic present. Finally his study of the old folk- and fairy-tales, which tempted him and other Romantics to direct imitation—as in his own *Fair-haired Ekbert* and Fouqué's *Undine*—led to his producing a series of fairy-tale dramas, which he may have conceived as a modern equivalent of the Aristophanic comedy, but which, partly by reason of their wilful formlessness, or rather complete turning upside down of all known forms, partly because their author was by nature lacking in the sense for constructive outline, can only rank as diffuse literary satires—such as *The Topsy-turvy World*, *Puss in Boots*, or *Bluebeard*<sup>2</sup>—full of grotesque, but often very amusing fancies, or as shapeless legends, like his *St Geneviève*, which still charm by their old-world atmosphere and their fluent lyrical romance, but which might just as well, or better, have been written without any view to stage-production. In fact, all these plays, as well as his drama *Emperor Octavian*, which was a sort of evangel of Romanticism, remained unplayed—none of them, indeed, could have been produced with any hope of success.

Tieck himself, strangely enough, cherished such a hope, and he was always struggling with ideas for reshaping the theatre itself, the actual stage and auditorium—for in his complicated folk-tale plays the spectators constantly take part in the action, sometimes in various degrees of participation—so as to render possible the performance of his dramatic works. He did not succeed in this—it was

<sup>1</sup> The well-known musician and composer, J. F. Reichardt, at this time Director of the orchestra of the Italian Opera at Berlin. (Trans. note.)

<sup>2</sup> *Die verkehrte Welt*, *Der gestiefelte Kater*, *Der Blaubart*.



impossible that he should succeed, because in this as in all his other attempts at reform, he set to work the wrong way about. To bring something new into being a man must do more than keep his gaze fixed constantly on the old. To a thorough-going believer in heredity Tieck's proceedings might almost suggest inheritance from his rope-making ancestry. Diligent but slow-moving, like a journeyman in the paternal trade, he went on twisting, with cunning and persistent hand, the strands of his poetic work, constantly meditating new devices, but with his face as constantly turned toward the old, progressing indeed, but always backwards.

Tieck had much to do with the theatre in a practical capacity, and we shall see something later of his activities in this line. As a dramatic critic he acquired immense authority; to the reading public of the time he was the Supreme Court in questions of theatrical art, his judgments were final. Nevertheless his work produced very little permanent impression; his dramatic work, indeed, next to none at all, while his criticism, though it had some lasting influence, was of much less importance than he himself and his contemporaries imagined. His ideas were too imperfectly clarified, too self-contradictory; he did not, like Goethe, push on, unswerving, toward a goal he had fixed on once for all; he spent his energies in marking time, or in an everlasting to and fro between the simple-hearted, far-off, ancient ways and the new aims and forms which he guessed at, but never really discerned, and never attained to.

The other, older Romanticists contributed little to the drama. Novalis did not write for the stage at all; E. T. A. Hoffman's only contribution was the musical setting of two operas—*Undine* and *The Jolly Musicians*—to librettos furnished by Fouqué and Brentano<sup>1</sup> respectively.

The period produced only two real dramatists, Heinrich von Kleist and Franz Grillparzer; and though the work

<sup>1</sup> Clemens Brentano (1778-1842) wrote also two plays in the Spanish 'cloak and rapier' style so much affected by the Romantic poets: *Ponce de Leon* and *The Founding of Prague*. Though both were performed they made no mark whatever.



of both was in essence romantic, neither of them called himself a Romanticist, or was made free of the masonic brotherhood of the elder Romantic poets. Kleist's poetic gifts, however, and particularly his great and very peculiar talent for drama, were only fully recognized at a period when recognition was no longer of value to the poet, a period, moreover, subsequent to that dealt with in this book. His plays, though they were performed, and were in some exceptional cases appreciated<sup>1</sup> as they deserved, did not at this time rank as stock plays in the dramatic repertory, and consequently had no important influence on the course of theatrical art.

The case of Grillparzer's voluminous and very important dramatic work was somewhat similar. In Vienna, where his pieces were produced at the Burgtheater, it made him the most admired dramatic author of his time, and he still holds his ground as the 'classic' among Austrian romantic dramatists, his plays, which have retained their freshness to this day, being stock pieces of the permanent repertory. But his influence, for the time, was purely local.

The chief contribution made by the Romantic movement to the stage of Germany proper was a class of drama which the élite of cultured literary Romanticism would not have been sorry to disown: the so-called "Drama of Fate."

The Drama of Fate, as Martersteig<sup>2</sup> remarks very aptly, was the bastard offspring of a union between Romanticism and antique tragedy. In several of the ancient Greek dramas—particularly in Sophocles' *Œdipus Rex*—the playwrights found an avenging Fate pursuing the members of certain devoted families with terrible calamities, driving them on, through a series of fatal mistakes, to incest, murder and other appalling deeds. This 'Ate' was now introduced into modern life, in the shape of a mystic, dæmonic Power, unjust but not to be averted, which hung with perpetual menace over particular human

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Tieck's criticism of *Kätchen von Heilbronn* in his *Dramaturgische Blätter*.

<sup>2</sup> Max Martersteig: *Das Deutsche Theater im 19 Jahrh.* (*The German Theatre in the Nineteenth Century*), p. 221.



beings, swooping down, as a rule, on appointed 'fatal' days, and occasioning the perpetration of the most horrible crimes on the usually quite innocent victims subjected to its mysterious, hostile influence.

The archetype of this whole class is to be found in Zacharias Werner's *The Twenty-fourth of February*,<sup>1</sup> a tragedy in one act. This uncanny little piece had a great influence on the drama of the period—it even had the honour of being produced at Weimar under Goethe's management—and gave rise to a plentiful crop of imitations. Told briefly, its story is as follows:

On a certain 24th of February long gone by, a farmer, named Kunz Kuruth, has thrown a knife at his father, in a fury at the father's having grossly insulted his (Kunz's) wife. The knife did not hit its mark, but none the less the father cursed his son and his grandchildren and at once died of an apoplectic stroke brought on by rage. Some time after—again on a 24th of February—the wife had just cut the throat of a hen with the same knife, when the little son, aged seven, got hold of the knife, and in playing at hen-killing with his two-year-old sister, killed her. The boy has gone out into the wide world, his grandfather's curse still on him, and nothing more has been heard of him. Things have gone badly with Farmer Kuruth, so badly that he has fallen into poverty and, when the play opens, is about to be turned out of house and home. Notice is given him by the authorities—on the 24th of February—that an execution is to be put on his farm. Kuruth, in despair, determines to throw himself over a precipice the next day. Suddenly there comes a knock on the door. A strange traveller asks for a night's shelter. Kunz Kuruth sees by his well-filled money-belt that he is rich. His dire necessity tempts him to murder the stranger; he seeks out once more the fatal knife, which he himself had flung at his father and with which the lost son had killed his little sister, and with it kills the rich traveller—who is none other than his own son, come home to help his father, himself unknown.

Zacharias Werner, though certainly not a great poet, was yet a writer of considerable talent. His dramas, full

<sup>1</sup> *Der Vierundzwanzigste Februar.*



of religious mysticism, of noble but exceedingly vague guardian Spirits, and dark, mysterious Powers, were relished both by playgoers and readers. Thus, besides *The Twenty-fourth of February*, another play, *Martin Luther, or the Consecration of Power*,<sup>1</sup> had extraordinary success on the stage, particularly in Berlin, where Iffland made Luther one of his bravoura-roles; while *The Sons of the Valley*<sup>2</sup> (a mystic, romantic drama, tinged with freemasonry), *Attila* (a sort of idealized picture of Napoleon, as the scourge of God for the sins of a corrupt world), and his later plays, appealed more strongly to the reading public.

Werner was a very complex and remarkable nature, in whom mysticism, far from being a mere expedient adopted for literary or dramatic effect, was the deep-seated tendency of a dim, perplexed soul. Accordingly, his plays, though now forgotten, are not without a value of their own. But the multitude of empty imitations called forth by his success were a perfect plague to the German theatre, swamping it, for the time, with a superficial fatalism and a cheap mysticism as facile and vulgar as a cook-maid's Book of Dreams. The chief representatives of this fashionable school were Adolph Müllner and Ernst von Houwald. The former followed closely in Werner's footsteps; so closely, indeed, that he produced a tragedy called *The Twenty-ninth of February*, which was a most faithful copy of Werner's *Twenty-fourth of the same month*. His best-known Drama of Fate, however, was *Guilt*,<sup>3</sup> which was a great success in Germany, and was also performed in Denmark. His work is in external form a reproduction of Werner, but he had not the smallest share of the imagination or of the innate mystical bent of his model. He is described, indeed, as having been "a very commonplace being, who, like the experienced advocate he was, concocted gloomy dramas because the public liked them, not because he himself was affected by any inward gloom."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Martin Luther oder Die Weihe der Kraft.*

<sup>2</sup> *Die Söhne des Thals.*

<sup>3</sup> *Die Schuld.*

<sup>4</sup> Julian Schmidt: *Geschichte der deutschen National-literatur im 19 Jahrh.* (*History of German National Literature in the Nineteenth Century*), p. 148. Adolph Müllner, who, as stated, was a lawyer, was born in 1774 and died in 1829.



It is true that, to Werner's gloom, he added a sickly sentimentality, which to us makes his plays even more distasteful than they would otherwise be, but which served at the time to delight the Berlin audiences.

The very popular pieces with which Müllner's fellow-playwright, Ernst von Houwald, enriched the German theatre—*The Lighthouse*, *The Picture*, *The Home-coming*,<sup>1</sup> etc.—were compounded according to this same recipe, a mixture of arbitrary fatality, would-be-mystical gruesomeness and mawkish sentimentality. Even Grillparzer, in his first play, *The Ancestress*,<sup>2</sup> made a contribution to the same *genre*, though he himself strenuously denied the fact, and though it must be admitted that in it the formula of hobgoblin Romanticism is applied with far greater talent than either of the two horror-mongers last named had at his command. Gutzkow, again, must needs write a *Thirteenth of November*,<sup>3</sup> yet another 'Schauerstück'<sup>4</sup> founded on the idea of a fatal day pursuing a family marked for destruction; while other dramatists, now completely forgotten—Bibra, Smets, Schröckinger, etc.—produced most blood-curdling 'Dramas of Fate,' whose titles—*The Bride in the Grave*, *The Blood-Bride*, *The Curse*, and the like—sufficiently indicate the nature of their contents.

It must be admitted, however, that this style of play, horrible in every sense, equally devoid of taste and of common sense, and showing hardly a touch of true fancy, far less of wit or creative humour, was at once combated and strongly denounced by the real poets and critics of the Romantic School.

Tieck, for instance, writing of a performance of Houwald's very popular piece *The Lighthouse*, after first giving a very amusing account of the remarkably confused story of the play, goes on: "We have now travelled so far from the simple prose of life, that we have come to rate almost too low the depressing works of Iffland and his like. And yet it would seem that, in this new

<sup>1</sup> *Der Leuchthurm, Das Bild, Die Heimkehr.*

<sup>2</sup> *Die Ahnfrau.*

<sup>3</sup> *Der Dreizehnte November.*

<sup>4</sup> Drama of Horror.

style of drama all that was blameworthy in the old—the element of the painful, the miseries of life, pettiness of motivation—has been incorporated. In it all this pettiness" (Kleinleben) "is mingled with *l'atroce* (I cannot find a German word that is quite suitable), and the result seems to me even worse than the Iffland style of play. Instead of debt and money-troubles, we have crime—abductions, adulteries, murder and the effusion of blood; instead of the uncle, the stern father, the remarkable old man, the General, we have Heaven itself, a Heaven even more self-willed and obstinate than those old family characters, and cruel into the bargain, for it knows of no other solution than "pangs of death and sepulchre," as Uncle Toby calls it.<sup>1</sup> . . . In one word, it seems to me that the rise of this new school (its distinguishing marks are so definite that we may well call it such) has merely led to a great falling off in our drama since Iffland's day, though even in that day our stage was nothing to boast of. . . . When I turn the pages of these new productions I often feel as if the authors were children, who, having stumbled, so to speak, on Goethe, Schiller, Shakespeare, and the Spaniards, are now set on playing at fate, human life, passion and the pathetic in their own childish fashion. From another point of view it often seems to me that these attempts must be made by people who have no idea of what a play is, but have, as it were, to discover the form afresh for themselves; we find so constantly in evidence the mere rudimentary beginnings of the art, shapeless and endless soliloquies, impossibilities of plot, an exposition that grows more and more involved as it goes on, or is recited, like the argument of a marionette-drama; instead of a *dénouement*, a mere cutting of the knot; and a complete absence of characters, with, at the most, declarations of opinion doing duty for them."<sup>2</sup>

Hitherto we have spoken only of tragedies, or domestic dramas of the gloomiest kind. Nor is this remarkable, for the Romantic period produced not a single good comedy,

<sup>1</sup> Tieck means Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night* (Act iii. Scene 4).

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Tieck: *Dramaturgische Blätter*, i. 169 seq.



nor even a genuinely amusing farce with vitality enough to keep the stage. Apart from Kleist's little one-act pleasantry, *Der zerbrochene Krug*,<sup>1</sup> which in its easy-flowing natural versification and its delicate handling is rather a straggler from the eighteenth century than a forerunner of anything new, the whole of the lighter repertory was in the hands of two wholesale manufacturers of plays. Of these one was the unfailing Kotzebue, the universal provider of drama, of whom it may at least be said that his wit is greatly preferable to his pathos. The other was Ernst Raupach,<sup>2</sup> a writer almost equally prolific, who, though now completely forgotten, was probably more played than any other German dramatist in the first half of the nineteenth century. Like Kotzebue—and Scribe after him—he dealt in every variety of drama, but he was as inferior to Kotzebue (and this is saying a good deal) as Kotzebue was to Scribe. He himself classified his productions as 'Serious Plays'—of these he published sixteen volumes—and 'Comic Plays,' for which a modest four volumes sufficed. As a comic dramatist he was for a time very popular, his chief successes being made with 'serial plays' (originally an invention of Kotzebue's) in which the same comic characters are brought on in play after play. One of these recurring characters, a type of jollity and simple cunning named Barber Schelle, became a well-known figure, owing mainly to the playing of the popular Berlin actor, Albert Gern,<sup>3</sup> which gave it life upon the stage.

'Serial plays' of the 'serious' variety, too, were produced by Raupach in great quantities. A Cromwell-Trilogy, consisting of *The Royalists*, *Cromwell Protector* and *The Death of Cromwell*, was much played; he left

<sup>1</sup> *The Broken Pitcher*.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Raupach (1784-1852), like Kotzebue, lived for a time in Russia; he was Professor of German Literature at the St Petersburg University from 1817 to 1822. In 1824 he settled in Berlin, and took up the profession of wholesale manufacturer of drama.

<sup>3</sup> Gern, born in Mannheim 1789, died in Berlin 1869, was the son of a well-known opera-singer. He was a pupil of Iffland and played at the Berlin National Theatre, originally in character parts. He was a successful Franz Moor, until Ludwig Devrient appeared. He then went over to the comic line, in which he became very popular, particularly in the above-mentioned part.

behind him eight volumes of *Hohenstaufen* tragedies, besides a *Treasure of the Nibelungs*; in short, no subject renowned in history was sacred to him, and that he did not succeed in working up the whole history of the world into dramas in which the flowing tirades were after Schiller and the sloppy characterization was his own, must be regarded as having been entirely due to the external, accidental limitations imposed by the brevity of human life.

His fees were higher than those of any other dramatist of his time, though this, to be sure, is not saying much. For every piece long enough to fill an evening he received 300 thalers<sup>1</sup>—and as some 120 of his pieces in all were put upon the stage, his total earnings were not to be despised. A genuine dramatic poet like Grillparzer, not to mention Kleist, had to be content with much less.

## II

Romantic artist-worship and the players—Court theatres and bureaucracy—  
Count Brühl as Intendant-General of the Berlin theatre.

THERE is no hiding the fact that, if the Romantic period in Germany is compared with French Romanticism, or even, we may venture to say, with Danish, it will be found that its contribution to dramatic literature, to the actual theatrical repertory, was feeble in the extreme, with little health or vitality in it. Can anything be imagined more completely dead than the plays mentioned in the preceding chapter? It by no means follows, however, that the Romantic spirit of the age, or rather the tastes engendered by the fashionable tendency, were without influence on the theatre and on theatrical art in general.

In the first place, the view taken of theatrical art, as of all the arts, differed completely from the sober unimpassioned way of regarding such matters which prevailed in the eighteenth century. The German Romanticists, and not they only, but Schiller and Goethe before them, had managed to invest the poet's vocation with a sort of supernatural nimbus,

<sup>1</sup> About £45.



marking its exemption from all human laws. It was no longer permissible to regard poetry as merely a noble and ingenious craft, for which some men had more aptitude than others. The romantic poet, at any rate while functioning as such, was no longer a mere man. He who had received the gift of poetry was in league with higher, or at least with unearthly, powers. His poetic work was done under dæmonic influence. He owed obedience to no human law, for he was under a higher, an inspired law. He was a sort of medium between the incorporeal world and the world of common men. Goethe, we know, thought that some of his most beautiful poems had sprung into being, as it were, without his own agency, as if in a hypnotic trance, and a similar belief was very common among the more fantastic Romanticists.<sup>1</sup>

Not only literary circles and the artistic dilettantism of the salons, but the great public itself, under the influence of the current romantic and mystical ideas, accepted this faith, and extended it, perhaps not altogether with the poets' approval, to include other branches of art. Hence arose an artist-worshipping cult, of a kind quite foreign to the ideas of the preceding century. Not only poets, but also painters, composers, musicians and actors, were looked upon with eyes of timid adoration, as a sort of wizards, weird Cagliostros, with mysterious powers at their beck and call. When Nicolo Paganini executed his demon shakes and gambolled up and down the G-string of his famous violin, his audiences were not content with merely admiring his amazing technique, learned by the strenuous labour of many years, or yielding to the enchantment of his rare musical gifts; for them his incredible skill was not of this flesh and blood, palpable world—he must have sold himself to Satan to acquire it.

The artists, and the executive artists in particular,

<sup>1</sup> Zacharias Werner, for instance, says of a scene in *The Sons of the Valley*, in which a recognition between father and son takes place to the notes of a harp played by a troubadour in the background: "How this passage came to me, I know not. This only I know, that every time I come to it I am seized with an inexplicable awe of my own inner life. It is possible that it was for the sake of this passage that I was born." . . . "And yet this passage," remarks Julian Schmidt, "has nothing in it beyond a crude operatic effect."—See Julian Schmidt: *Geschichte der deutschen Nationalliteratur im 19. Jahrh.*, p. 129.

were not slow in adopting this faith in their supernatural powers, and in the case of actors its effects were at first of some real importance, though later on the purely ludicrous side of the matter became by far the most prominent. For the faith of the public in their daemonic attributes, which most actors were only too ready to share, gave them in relation to their audiences that suggestive power which is a very important element in theatrical art, and sometimes produced in their minds a confidence in their own lofty inspiration, which, in certain cases at least, helped to stimulate their powers.

Thus it was that there arose in Germany a new type of actor—the morbid, inspired, daemonic type. The German actor of the eighteenth century, used to being looked on as little better than a vagabond, was anxious, as a rule, to discard everything that savoured of the stroller and mummer, and to raise himself to the level of the respectable burgher; and he accordingly copied the burgher's neat, handsome but quite commonplace style of dress, and also adopted his way of life as far as possible. All this was now changed. Taking their cue from the Romantic authors, to whom the old picturesque life of vagabondage<sup>1</sup> seemed the ideal condition for a player, the actors sought to make themselves as different as possible

<sup>1</sup> A. W. Schlegel, for instance, says: "The actor, with his equivocal way of life (which, in the very nature of things, it is impossible to alter) must be possessed by a certain reckless enthusiasm for his art, if he is to achieve the extraordinary. . . . As soon as the ordinary citizen's anxiety to secure a sufficient livelihood for himself and his wife and children gets the upper hand in an actor, all progress in his art is at an end. We do not mean to say that the latter years of a meritorious artist's life should not be provided for. But actors whose powers have deserted them owing to age, sickness, or other accidental circumstances, should be paid, not to go on, but to cease from, acting."—A. W. Schlegel: *Ueber dram. Kunst und Lit.* iii. 422 seq. (note). Tieck, too, looked back with romantic longing to the days when bands of players rolled along the country roads in their green wagons, with no thought of Directors of Court theatres or of fixed salaries. Indeed, from the days of *Wilhelm Meister* on, the vagabond life of the strolling player was one of the favourite topics of Romanticism. In France it was the theme of Théophile Gautier's capital story, *Le Capitaine Fracasse*. It must be allowed, however, that in their own case the Romantic poets showed no such keenness for a return to mediæval conditions of poverty and Bohemianism as they displayed on behalf of the actors. On the contrary, they sought by all means in their power to regularize and improve the position in regard to author's fees, and to obtain for themselves permanent posts as dramatic advisers and stage-managers at the regular theatres.



in every way from the everyday citizens, the 'Philistines' as they now began to be called. Thus the German actor of the romantic type was a strange being, with long, wild hair, black if possible, framing a pale, emaciated face; deep, melancholy eyes under dark, contracted brows, and a bitter, sorrowful smile on his quivering lips; his form shrouded in a long Roman cloak, moving among his fellow men now with ostentatious gloomy remoteness, now with hollow, rather scornful mirth.

This typical "actor of genius" held his ground in Germany for a long time, and even now has not entirely disappeared, though the effect produced by him in these days is by no means what it was in the good old times of Romance. In those days there was a universal passion for 'genius,' and 'genius' was scarcely thinkable without its external attributes of mystery, suffering, and contempt for the world. One effect produced by this whole current of taste was an immense heightening of the public interest in the theatre, which in the eighteenth century had not been strong. It now became something like a mania. In the salons hardly anything was talked about but the theatre; nothing else was written about in the newspapers; one might almost have thought, says Martersteig, "that Germany was governed from the critics' studies and the stage."

The external conditions of theatrical activity, too, had altered in other important respects. In the eighteenth century the theatres had been private enterprises, under professional direction, the 'Principals' being nearly always actors. The beginning of the nineteenth century saw the institution of a number of so-called National Theatres, which, however, differed from the earlier private undertakings only in respect of the ownership of the theatre building, which was now usually vested in a joint-stock company or association of the well-to-do citizens of the place, who either engaged a salaried professional to manage the theatre or farmed it out to such an expert on lease. It was under an arrangement of the latter kind that Iffland carried on the management of the Berlin National Theatre till his death in 1814, though in

this case the King, Friedrich Wilhelm III., was closely connected with the enterprise and gave it great support. Iffland's management was capable and sagacious in a high degree, and made the Berlin theatre the first in Germany in quality and standing, in spite of the difficult times through which it passed during the periods of war and the French occupation of the city.

But when the war was over and Napoleon crushed, and the German Princes felt safe once more, a strong political reaction set in, and the fear of the foreign enemy gave place to an almost stronger fear of popular revolutionary movements aiming at political liberty. Though the function of the theatres as institutions for the instruction and amusement of the people was now recognized, it was deemed to be no longer possible to allow them to remain, even nominally, the property of the nation. It was necessary to make it clear that they belonged to the Princes, and to this end they must become, in name as well as in fact, Royal Court Theatres, receiving a subvention directly from the Royal coffers and taking their orders directly from the Court. Further, it would no longer do to select the Directors of these theatres, now recognized as art institutions, from among specialists who knew something about theatrical art; for these specialists, whether theatrical artists or literary men, were very often infected with liberal ideas, and besides, they would be apt to be partial, and to favour, not only their own art, but also individuals for whom they had a personal preference, and who might easily be persons unacceptable to Their Royal and Princely Highnesses. Therefore, it was thought, it would be much better to place the direction of the theatres in the hands of men who ought clearly to be impartial, inasmuch as they held no opinions whatever about art, and on whose solidly anti-progressive views full reliance could at any rate be placed. In pursuance of this process of reasoning, a system completely new to Germany was introduced—the system, namely, of State-control of the theatres exercised through Court- or State-officials, retired Stewards of the Household who “had to be given something,” chamberlains who had shown some turn for amateur art, or military



officers of rank, for whose swords there was no immediate use.

The effects of this system were sometimes less pernicious than might have been expected—in Germany, as elsewhere, members of the nobility who possessed talent and an intelligent interest in art were not entirely lacking—but in most cases this systematized Court control was injurious to art, and offensive to the expert subordinates who, without the position and authority of directors, had to do the courtier-directors' work for them.

In Berlin, which now possessed the leading theatre of Germany, and had become, as well, its literary centre—symptoms, these, of the growing movement towards centralization—Chamberlain Count Karl Moritz von Brühl was chosen to succeed Iffland, being given the title, still<sup>1</sup> held by his successors in office, of Intendant-General of the Royal Stage-plays. This was as fortunate a selection as the new reactionary system permitted, for the Count was an able and upright man, with a strong and genuine interest in art. The Court, indeed, regarded him as an expert specialist in such matters, seeing that he had once appeared in an amateur performance at the Weimar Court under Goethe's management, and, moreover, had dabbled a good deal in music, poetry and drawing, also as an amateur. Furthermore, owing to his birth and position, his relations with the State authorities were of the most advantageous kind; so much so, that on his asking the Chancellor, Prince von Hardenberg, what subvention he might count on receiving, the reply was: "Do you give us the best theatre in Germany, and then let me know what it has cost."

The first of these instructions, however, Count Brühl failed to carry out. Iffland had accomplished it with much inferior means and under much more difficult conditions. But the Berlin Royal Theatre was never, under the rule of the high and mighty Intendants-General, to be "the best theatre in Germany"; it has always been outstripped by other theatres, particularly by private ones managed by theatrical specialists.

The rock on which Brühl split, and which proved fatal

<sup>1</sup> 1916.



to most of the other Court-directors, was not so much his insufficient understanding of art matters, as his lack of theatre-craft, of technical knowledge, and his consequent inability to take part himself in the practical working of the theatre. Whereas Iffland, like other old-fashioned professional managers, had himself dealt with all his administrative duties and his office work and correspondence, the Intendant-General's bureau was now a secretariat of imposing dimensions, requiring a whole building to itself. Four private secretaries, with an army of clerks, sat, as Devrient says, "behind high-railed desks, hard at work doing nothing." And as the main object of this imposing bureau was to strike awe and terror into the hearts of the common herd of dramatists, players and theatre-goers, its existence did not exclude the necessity for a second bureau in the theatre itself, which was likewise filled with a crowd of non-professional clerks, who dragged out through weeks of voluminous correspondence questions that in the old days would have been settled in a few minutes' talk.

Now, as it was with this large ministerial staff that the Intendant-General came most closely in contact, and as his work came to him through them, it was only natural that things should go as they always have gone with theatres placed under bureaucratic administration of this kind. The chief, being himself ignorant, came to rely on his office staff not only in administrative questions but also in matters of art, and lost touch with the actors and dramatic authors so completely that before long it was as if the theatre existed for the sake of the functionaries of the bureau, while dramatists and players were regarded rather as a necessary evil, bringing confusion and disturbance into the orderly office routine. The actors, finding that increases in salary and favour in the allotment of parts depended on the bureau, and that they could most readily obtain these advantages by means other than the display of proficiency in their art, lost all respect for their immediate artistic chiefs, the stage-managers; and these latter—in this case the two senior actors, Ludwig Devrient and P. A. Wolff—receiving no support from the bureau or



from the Director, soon grew thoroughly sick of the hopeless struggle to work up the performances into an artistic whole. Both of them gave up the game before many years were out; Wolff, whose nerves broke down under the strain of the hopeless and distracting task, throwing up his duties as stage-manager altogether; while Devrient at last let things go as they would, either absenting himself altogether from rehearsals of pieces in which he did not happen to be playing, or rushing off in a rage in the middle of them, leaving the field to the mediocrities, while he himself sought the neighbouring tavern, there to pour out to his friends his scorn for the whole affair and to drown his wrath in champagne.

For mediocrity, the mediocrity that is untroubled by convictions, these office-ruled Royal Court Theatres of Germany, of which the Berlin theatre was only a specimen, were a perfect Eldorado; while men of outstanding, independent talent rarely felt at home in them, and still more rarely, in these unnatural conditions, found opportunity to develop freely along the lines marked out for them by their artistic powers.

By the time when Brühl resigned his post, after a reign of thirteen years, this Berlin experiment in theatrical management by an official bureau with a nobleman of the Court as figurehead had resulted in complete artistic chaos. Brühl himself came out of the struggle broken in bodily health and deeply disappointed by the failure of the sanguine hopes with which he had taken up office. Working singlehanded, by dint of sheer energy and professional knowledge, Iffland had rescued the Berlin National Theatre from very serious administrative difficulties, created a solid tradition of ensemble in playing which could not be surpassed by any German theatre, maintained the rank and dignity of the theatre as the first in the country, kept the balance true between Drama and Opera, pleased the King and Court, and even steered successfully through the troublous times of the French invasion. And, finding all this ready to his hand, Intendant-General Brühl, with his immense staff of officials, with unlimited resources in money, with a company containing

several actors of mark and one of great genius, not only failed to maintain it, but, in spite of his excellent intentions, left it all in confusion, disintegrated, ruined. The administration had become slow, roundabout and complicated. The organized interplay created in Iffland's time had gone to pieces—ensemble was now a matter of chance. "A satisfactory ensemble was now only attained when chance brought together actors of similar temperament, who worked together in good understanding, of their own accord. It could never be attained at all in plays with a long list of characters. . . . The older members of the company, who had all received their training in a more vital artistic atmosphere, infected the younger actors with their despondency—all enthusiasm, all joy in united effort was paralysed. The despotic rule of the Intendancy had brought the actor to a point at which he cared for nothing but himself, and this gave rise in course of time to an artistic demoralization such as had previously had no parallel in theatrical history."

Such is the judgment passed by Eduard Devrient, the historian of the German stage, himself an actor and theatrical manager, on the Prussian reactionary system of theatrical government by noblemen of the Court.

One might have supposed that the disastrous results of this first experiment would have doomed the whole system to death. On the contrary: men die—even Counts and chamberlains die—times change, revolutions and wars come and go, but Prussian bureaucracy will always be with us, even if Prussia herself should perish, and will always stand for the very negation of art.

After Count Brühl, who, as we have said, was one of the best of his kind, came another courtier Count, whose name is no more worth remembering than the names of his numerous subordinate officials. They were, one and all, only chapter-headings in the story of the system, which has spread widely and has been maintained with careful piety down to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1916.



## III

Tieck as Dramatic Adviser at Dresden—His theories on theatrical art—His views on scenery and costume—The reasons for his failure in practical theatre-craft.

LUDWIG TIECK, the apostle of Romanticism in the theatre, was a complete antithesis to the bureaucratic theatrical Directors. As we have already seen, the theatre and theatrical art were his chief interests. He had tried on several occasions to establish a direct connexion with the actual, living stage; he had applied, for instance, both at Frankfurt am Main and at Vienna for the position of stage-manager and dramatic adviser, but had failed of success in both cases. In 1818, after years of a wandering existence much hampered by money troubles, he settled in Dresden, where brighter days were to dawn for him. Here he became the central figure of the literary circle, respected by the older men and enthusiastically acclaimed by the younger. His numerous romances won for him, in some measure, the popularity he had tried and failed to achieve by his dramatic works and his tales. Though in his wishes and plans for his literary career it was on these dramas and tales, founded on old folk-tales and legends, that he had rested his hopes of becoming a real poet of the people, his writings had hitherto appealed only to other writers, or at most to a chosen few outside their circle; perhaps because his works, while purporting to be folk-poetry, were really only literary experiments, literature founded on literature, not on life. His romances gained him an audience, if not among the people, at least among wider circles of the reading public.

Another of his artistic gifts too—his great talent for dramatic reading—won him a large circle of admirers in Dresden. He manifestly took great pleasure in the exercise of this gift; making his home, which he shared with a certain Countess Finkenstein and her two daughters, the scene of a series of literary-dramatic soirées, held nearly every evening, to which his friends and acquaint-



ances were invited. A young author of no great mark, named Ludwig Rellstab, who visited his famous brother author in Dresden and was invited to these evening readings, gives a vivid account, in his *Reminiscences*, of the literary court which Tieck gathered round him and of the impression created by him in Dresden society; an account which affords a characteristic view of the doings of a typical literary salon of the period. "Tieck sat there," he tells us, "—one of the handsomest of men as regards his flashing, intellectual countenance, but bent and bowed with rheumatism,—in a comfortable easy-chair, surrounded by his invited guests, like a prince, carrying on the liveliest discourse. Sometimes he would rise and move about with a light step, addressing a suitable word to everyone in turn. . . . The handsome apartment was soon full, and the guests took their places, arranged in a semi-circle. Tieck (he had not then begun to wear glasses) sat in the middle, serious and manly, with his handsome face; there was a small table in front of him, and on it his book and a pair of candelabra shedding a brilliant light. Among those present there were (I remember) the Wolffs (husband and wife—the theatrical artists),<sup>1</sup> Count von Kalkreuth, and Professor Wendt, who has written much about music at Göttingen and Leipzig. All this is merely to indicate clearly the high consideration enjoyed by Tieck.

"That evening he read a piece which has only recently<sup>2</sup> begun once more to be appreciated as it deserves in Germany: *The Taming of the Shrew*. He read it without giving the names of the persons speaking or otherwise indicating them, relying entirely on his lofty art and his gift, developed by practice to complete mastery, for giving the necessary individuality to each character by changes of facial expression, variety of intonation, and, generally, of spiritual attitude. He had an extraordinary wealth of creative power in this respect; the piece he was reading contained a great number of characters, and he outlined all of them with such sure and original strokes that they could

<sup>1</sup> See above, pp. 255-256, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Rellstab's reminiscences, *Aus meinem Leben*, appeared in 1861.



be clearly distinguished, even in the most complicated scenes. . . . I had occasion later on to hear readings by many famous masters : Holtei,<sup>1</sup> Eduard Devrient, Dawison<sup>2</sup> and Palleske,<sup>3</sup> who, each in his own way, (the two first particularly), kept up distinctions of character in their reading. . . . One could say for them at least that they got life into the thing, but, compared with what Tieck put into his reading, what they accomplished in this way must count for almost nothing."<sup>4</sup>

Shortly before Tieck settled in Dresden, the Saxon capital in its turn had acquired a Court Theatre on the Prussian model, under an Intendant-General. The third in succession to hold this office was a certain High Steward von Lüttichau, appointed in 1824, who had formerly been Chief Inspector of Forests. Whether his activities in the Forest Department caused him to feel an interest in the singer of forest loneliness, cannot be said with certainty ; certain it is, however, that he invited Tieck's co-operation as dramatic adviser, an inspiration which might seem, at first sight, the happiest that could have occurred to him. Tieck was recognized as the first authority in Germany on theatrical matters. In his critical and other writings he had dealt with great thoroughness not only with dramatic poetry, but also with the theory of scenic art, and even with the technique of the stage. He had travelled much, and had seen much of the best theatrical art of his day (a fact to which his *Letters on the English Theatre*,<sup>5</sup> as well

<sup>1</sup> The poet Karl von Holtei (1798-1880). He attempted acting in his youth, but without success. He became popular later as a reader, and practised the art as a profession, making reading tours round Germany. Shakespeare readings were his speciality.

<sup>2</sup> The actor Bogumil Dawison (1818-1872), a Polish Jew, who at a period subsequent to this had great success as a character actor, creating much sensation throughout Germany by his impersonations, which showed a talent somewhat forced and ostentatious, but were executed with great external virtuosity. He had a permanent engagement at the Vienna Burgtheater for five years, and at Dresden for about ten, but apart from these periods most of his career was occupied in 'starring' tours.

<sup>3</sup> Emil Palleske (1823-1880), the well-known author of *The Life and Works of Schiller* and several other works in theatrical criticism and *belles lettres*. He also began as an actor, and later adopted dramatic reading as a profession.

<sup>4</sup> L. Rellstab : *Aus meinem Leben*, ii. 46 seq.

<sup>5</sup> In the first part of this Volume we have had occasion to quote these interesting letters.



as other works, bore witness) and it had been the dream of his life to obtain a position such as that now offered him.

That nothing very remarkable came of this happily conceived appointment, we must ascribe mainly to the system of management, though a number of other circumstances had their share in the result.

Tieck was fifty-two years old when he was given the appointment<sup>1</sup>: he had thus already reached an age when it was somewhat late in the day to take up work that was completely new to him; and this may account for his having so soon grown weary in the struggle to realize his ideas.

At first, however, he set to work with energy and zeal. As he was a practised master in the art of dramatic recital, and had busied himself so much—though mainly by way of precept—with the theory of theatrical art, he naturally had this side of the matter pretty much at his fingers' ends, and was able to present his ideas in definite, tangible form. His theory of stage delivery was diametrically opposed to Goethe's. Though the typical Romanticist of his time, he yet, curiously enough, held strongly to the school of pronounced naturalism; a method of stage-delivery based on ordinary speech was in his view the only one by which truth, and, through truth, beauty could be attained. The artificially rhythmical style of verse delivery introduced by Goethe was intolerable to him, though in other respects he sympathized with the great poet's dramatic principles, and, like all the other Romanticists, looked up to him as a model for imitation.

In a treatise, *On the time which should be observed in stage delivery*, he expresses his views very clearly, in words which seem to point directly at Goethe.

"We Germans," he says, "always bring out the iambic measure strongly, even in passages which are quite prosaic, nay, in many cases, quite flat; and our players consider this method of stressed beats a merit. In really good German verse delivered with intelligence, the measure

<sup>1</sup> Rellstab, in his reminiscences, seems to indicate that Tieck held an appointment in the theatre as early as 1821, but all other authorities known to me agree that he was appointed in 1825, and that the appointment was made by Lüttichau, who took the helm in 1824.



will never be entirely lost, provided only that the sensitive player is careful always to conform in his delivery to the intentions of the poet. But when actors imagine that they must make a little pause after each line,<sup>1</sup> and must raise their voice in the middle of the line and sink it at the end (or the other way about, as we sometimes see done), the result is such a schoolboy-like style of declamation that the flattest, most prosaic domestic picture is to be preferred to the finest tragedy rendered in such a fashion.

"Even more destructive is it to the euphony of iambic verse, when players, who happen to have learning enough to know what an iambus is, try to bring out every (so-called) 'quantity'; as, for instance in *Iphigenie*, Scene 1:

Und es gewöhnt sich nicht mein Geist hieher,<sup>2</sup>

instead of saying

Und es gewöhnt sich nicht, etc.

Conversely, a long syllable should replace a short in " [the third foot of] " the following line:

Ihm schwärmen abwärts immer die Gedanken.<sup>3</sup>

When Ariel in *The Tempest* (Scene 2) makes his report to Prospero, and in describing the storm says<sup>4</sup>:

Zeus' Blitze, die Verkünder  
Des schreckbarn Donnerschlags, sind schneller nicht  
Und Blick-entrinnender; das Feu'r, die Stöße  
Von schwefelichem Gekrach, sie stürmten, schien's, etc.,

an actor, who in speaking the lines should adhere exactly to the ordinary iambic measure, would not only ruin all

<sup>1</sup> Cp. Goethe's *Rules for Actors*, para. 33, in which a directly opposite view is expressed. See above, p. 267.

<sup>2</sup> Goethe: *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, Act i. Scene 1, line 6.

<sup>3</sup> Goethe: *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, Act i. Scene 1, line 18.

<sup>4</sup> *The Tempest*, i. 2:

Jove's lightnings, the precursors  
O' the dreadful thunderclaps, more momentary  
And sight-outrunning were not; the fire, and cracks  
Of sulphurous roaring, the most mighty Neptune  
Seem to besiege, etc.

the beauties of language with which Schlegel's<sup>1</sup> excellent artistry in verse has enabled him so happily and appropriately to adorn his rendering, but would moreover turn this fine, rapid, animated speech into a dragging flat one.

"No expert needs to be reminded that all kinds of metres enter, in the most various ways, into the rhythms of dramatic iambic verse, but the great actor, endowed with a fine ear and a powerful and beautiful voice, can weave into its texture yet many other rhythmic beauties; while the player who thinks he has mastered the delivery of iambic verse because he can measure off a monotonous babble for us by beat of metronome, would be better advised if he had his part written out for him in prose,<sup>2</sup> so as at least to approach a little nearer to the truthful and natural way of speech which comes to him unconsciously in prose plays such as *Emilia Galotti* or *Minna von Barnhelm*. Though nowadays, indeed, we often find actors adopting a strained, bombastic tone even in prose, wherever the dialogue rises to nobility of style."

Had Tieck confined himself to teaching the company to practise his sound and clear principles of diction and presentation of character, and had his position been one of such authority as to enable him to carry out this very important improvement—an improvement urgently needed at this time—it is certain that he would have made the Dresden theatre one of the first in the country, and would have rendered an invaluable service to German theatrical art. It was most unfortunate that such matters as stage-setting, costume, and the like also fell within his province and interested him deeply, for of these branches of the art, though he was constantly thinking out improvements in them, he had no sufficient knowledge.

It was natural enough that he should be dissatisfied with the ordinary stage-picture of the time. Scene-

<sup>1</sup> The lines are from A. W. Schlegel's well-known translation of Shakespeare, produced by him in collaboration with Tieck. This excellent translation was by far the most important service rendered by Schlegel to the theatre.

<sup>2</sup> This piece of advice was actually followed, or rather it had already been acted on before it was given—by certain actors and actresses, when iambic verse appeared in the German drama for the first time in the plays of Schiller and Goethe. The procedure excited A. W. Schlegel's intensest indignation. See *Ueber dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, iii. 42.



painting was at a low ebb in Germany at this period, what good scenery there was being the work of foreign artists, usually Italians. Certainly the existing scenes—bare rooms with open wings for walls, and landscapes in symmetrical perspective—were not well-calculated to evoke a romantic atmosphere; but Tieck failed to discover any method of evolving, from present conditions so devoid of style, something more satisfying to his imagination. He conceived, accordingly, that the true method must lie in a return to the most primitive forms of stage-setting. Of these, however, he had no knowledge. He himself admitted that he could not understand the stage-arrangements of antiquity; and this is not wonderful, considering that the riddle of the ancient stage, in reality a very simple one, was not finally solved till the end of the nineteenth century. He believed that he understood the stage of the Middle Ages; but this was not really the case, for he was a victim to the usual misunderstanding about the 'tripartite' Mystery-stage.<sup>1</sup> He came nearer to a real understanding of the English Renaissance-stage, though even of it his notions were not really clear; and it was on this type of theatre that he was most inclined to base his reforms, especially as he hoped that this would enable him to realize his dream of performing Shakespeare in an unadulterated and unabridged form.

But these experiments in archaism, apart from the fact that he himself was not thoroughly clear as to their aim, brought him into constant conflict with the existing theatrical conditions, which could not be altered so as to permit of a reversion to primitive forms without a radical break with the present which it was not within his power to bring about.

His attitude to the question of stage-costume showed similar indecision. To this matter, too, he devoted a lengthy essay, full of eloquent self-contradictions, and arriving eventually at sufficiently irrational conclusions. He begins by condemning the absurd, conventional

<sup>1</sup> See vol. i. (*The Earliest Times*), pp. 111-152; and, for the mediæval theatre, vol. ii. (*Middle Ages and Renaissance*), pp. 51-85.

costumes which, on the eighteenth century stage, were made to do duty for the drama of every bygone period, historic or prehistoric. One would naturally suppose that, with such an enthusiastic worshipper of the poetic forms of the past and of primitive feelings and manners, this would lead on to an effort to render the stage and theatrical art more pictorially effective and more evocative of historic atmosphere, by fostering the dawning taste for historically correct costumes characteristic of the various periods represented. The very reverse is the case. He proceeds to attack this tendency to historic accuracy with great vigour and in most contemptuous terms, and winds up a lengthy discussion of the matter in these words: "In short, there is a typical theatrical costume, just as there is a painter's costume and a sculptor's costume; an actor who knows his business will adhere closely to this typical costume, only departing from it slightly so as to indicate by delicate shades differences of nationality, or distinguish a sharply drawn character. Such modifications, however, should be based on a common element, a poetic and pictorial theatrical costume, such as in all its details—its hats, cloaks, doublets, boots, etc.—has perhaps never been worn by anyone in real life; just as I demand of the true actor that the nobility of his individual nature should shine through the imitation (!) he is presenting, so that I should not imagine that I see before me a real drunkard, criminal, or galley-slave."

In other words, the decadent conventionalism of the eighteenth century all over again, only that the stage-picture is to be based on a different convention.

In the following passage he fills in the outlines of his general conception in somewhat greater detail:

"The costume adopted for the so-called Middle Ages or Age of Chivalry may be pretty much the same, whatever the century; the so-called Spanish costume, along with the dress already spoken of" (*i.e.* the 'typical poetic' theatrical costume), "will serve well enough for all poetical productions; and if proper consideration is paid to the period of the Thirty Years' War and to that of Peter the



Great (!), and approximate certainty arrived at, without causing too serious offence, respecting Greek and Roman costume, every theatre, when account is also taken of modern dress, will be fully provided with all requirements."

Such is his hatred for accurate historic costume, that he considered it better to play Shakespeare's dramas, for instance, in modern dress (that is, dress of Tieck's own time), than to try to bring them into conformity with the costume of the Shakespearian or any other historic period; and he is carried by this view of his to such lengths in paradoxical contradiction of his own Romantic creed, that he does not hesitate to take up the cudgels for a grotesque example, witnessed by him, of the tastelessness of Berlin in such matters. "In my youth," he says, "when Fleck<sup>1</sup> played Othello in a General Officer's red uniform, with a white-plumed cocked-hat, and the other officers in the play, as well as all the other characters, the Venetian senators etc., were dressed in equally modern black costumes, all this, so far from disturbing the spectators, actually enhanced the effect. This costume gave the Moor nobility and force—dignified him by marks of rank familiar to all of us. . . . To dress the Moor in oriental costume must of necessity always produce a disturbing and repellent effect."<sup>2</sup>

No doubt Tieck's difficulties in his practical dealings with the theatre were largely due to such paradoxical views as these, and to his general propensity for working backwards; but what rendered his position altogether impossible was the complete lack of forethought displayed by the supreme direction of the theatre in determining its conditions. If the superior direction had been in Tieck's own hands and he had been able to have his ideas carried out by practical men of the theatre, it is possible that some good results might have been obtained. As it was, he was attached as a co-ordinate "Beirat"<sup>3</sup> to three stage-managers, functioning by turns—the actors Julius,

<sup>1</sup> Fleck was Tieck's favourite performer. He was, in fact, an actor of great talent. See vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), pp. 212-214.

<sup>2</sup> Tieck's dissertation on Costume is contained in his *Dramaturgische Blätter*, ii. 208-232.

<sup>3</sup> Adjunct Councillor.



Werdy and Pauli—with a secretary, Hofrath Winkler,<sup>1</sup> all of whom held mutually antagonistic views on theatrical management; and all doubtful or disputed questions, such as at once arose and continued throughout constantly to present themselves, had to be referred for final decision to a High Steward and ex-Inspector-General of Forests totally ignorant of all matters of art.

As an independent authority on literature and æsthetics, unconnected with the theatre, Tieck had been regarded by the actors with spontaneous and sincere admiration; but as soon as he came inside the theatrical circle and, without being invested with the necessary external authority, was set to instructing them in their own craft, their admiration died away, and the intriguing and quizzing to which the members of 'the profession' are so prone at once set in. The strength of hand which might have put down these manifestations was not among Tieck's gifts, and besides, some two years after his appointment—like Lessing before him—he made the great mistake of resuming his activities as dramatic critic, while continuing to take part in the stage-management of the theatre. This naturally destroyed any chance he might otherwise have had of influencing the actors to good effect. He himself felt this, and gradually withdrew more and more completely to his study. He retained his post, but seldom came to the theatre, and ceased entirely to take any active part in productions.

In spite of his lofty standards, his wide knowledge of the theatre, and his genuine, earnest love for it, he failed in his attempt to raise it to the level of his ideals. Goethe's remorseless energy had enabled him to create a school which long continued to exercise a dominating influence in Germany, though the petty conditions under which he

<sup>1</sup> Hofrath Winkler (1775-1856), was a very prolific playwright—he wrote under the *nom de guerre* of Theodore Hell—many of whose productions were translations of French pieces. The appointment of Dramatic Adviser had been held by him before Tieck joined the theatre. As he continued to hold office as Secretary, and to have his own very insignificant pieces performed, and as his opinions were diametrically opposed to Tieck's, the position was one certain to breed dissension. Of the three actor stage-managers, Friedrich August Werdy (1770-1847), was an elderly 'heroic father' of Schröder's school; Ludwig Ferdinand Pauli (1793-1841), was a young man without training of any sort, but who played semi-comic parts in domestic drama with talent; while Julius, an elderly ex-soldier, took 'dignified' parts.



worked, rather than his own innermost convictions, had determined its nature. But Tieck, though inspired by a much deeper love for the theatre, lacked Goethe's overbearing power of will, and he never succeeded in bringing forth into the world of reality the dream of a truly Romantic form of theatrical art on which his soft, vague spirit brooded so long. The Dresden Court Theatre, as a home of drama, never attained to artistic independence and influence; while the opera, directed by the genius of Carl Maria von Weber, was to realize the romantic ideal for which Tieck had longed in vain.

#### IV

Ludwig Devrient and his relation to Romanticism—Kean and Devrient—Devrient's childhood and youthful escapades—Ochsenheimer—Devrient joins a travelling company—The nature of his art—His personality.

OWING to the intellectual and spiritual confusion to which the various currents of tendency, supervening too rapidly one upon another, gave rise at this time, and to the dispersion of theatrical effort over many independent centres, no single theatre in Germany could definitely take the lead, and still less could any theatre give complete expression to a single, definite artistic tendency. In respect to repertory and to the art of acting alike the stage continued for a long time to come to present a chaotic mixture of various schools—the early rationalistic school associated with the names of Lessing and Schröder, the classic idealism introduced by Goethe and Schiller, and, finally, the new Romanticism. The system of management by courtier-bureaucrats, spreading from Prussia, made it impossible for a strong professional expert, capable of combining the various tendencies into an artistic unity, to come to the front. In these circumstances the Romantic movement, new and vital as it was, failed to obtain control of a single theatre which could be said to be really its own, to be devoted to the production of its works and realization of its theories. It had to be content to show itself here and there, in isolated perform-



68.—Ludwig Devrient (p. 305).





ances; it never found for itself a body of actors truly representative of its ideas; even at the period of its greatest literary productiveness no single performance of a romantic work on the stage was ever carried through in the genuine Romantic spirit. So far as Germany is concerned, it was reserved for the neo-romantic movement of our own time to realize the scenic ideas which hovered before the minds of the early Romanticists as dim, vaguely outlined conceptions.

Strictly speaking, the period produced only one actor who gave expression in really vital, pregnant form to the ideals of the Romantic school of poetry.

This actor was Ludwig Devrient.

Not that even he was recognized by all the founders of the school as the fitting interpreter of their ideas. Tieck, in particular, often preferred much tamer, more humdrum actors to this unique, fantastic genius—perhaps because the aspect of Romanticism embodied by Devrient was not the element in it dearest to Tieck: the element compact of lyrical poetry and rhythmic harmony, of dreams, of vague emotion, of broodings on the far-off past. On the other hand, many of the Romantic leaders took Devrient to their hearts, and, first and foremost among these, E. T. A. Hoffmann, with whom he stood in the closest spiritual affinity. Both were fully-equipped artists when they made each other's acquaintance; so that there can hardly be any question of either of them having influenced the development of the other. Rather we should regard them as two incarnations, as it were, of a single spiritual type, who happened to meet, and straightway were at one in their common love for the glaringly fantastic, their humorous view of the Philistine world of reality, and their joy in experimenting with all sorts of combinations of that same pedestrian, unimaginative reality with weird, passionately contorted mysticism.

The position held by Devrient in the history of German theatrical art is somewhat similar to that of Kean in England. They are alike in their complete isolation, and alike also in springing from kindred spiritual tendencies in their two countries, as rare, morbidly



developed, spontaneous phenomena, not products artificially reared by means of literary and academic culture.

Ludwig Devrient was almost exactly contemporary with Kean—he was born on the 18th December 1784, in Berlin—but, as was only natural considering how little intercourse there was at that period between Germany and England, they never saw each other, and Kean at least probably never even heard of the German brother-artist with whom he had so many points of affinity.

Their origin, however, was not one of these points. The obscurity of Kean's birth, the facts of which are even yet not altogether clear, and his vagabond, gipsy-like existence in a childhood and youth spent in the world of the theatre, marked him out, as it were, in advance as destined to be the typical Romantic actor; while there was nothing in Ludwig Devrient's descent, nor yet in his family traditions or his early education, that seemed to point in any way to a theatrical career.

His father was neither more nor less than a wholesale draper, belonging to an old and respectable French-Flemish family of traders—the name was originally written "de Vrient"—who for nearly two hundred years had adhered steadfastly to their commercial and religious traditions, as Huguenot refugees belonging to the confession of the French Reformed Church. The elder Devrient, a well-to-do, precise little trader, equally punctual in his business and his religious duties, was twice married. There were a couple of sons by the first marriage, and of these the eldest, Philip, was later on to be the father of three of the best known among German actors, Karl, Eduard, and Emil Devrient. We can understand what led these grandsons to break with the family traditions, as their choice of profession was made after their uncle had won his laurels on the stage. But how this eminently respectable family came by such a degenerate son as Ludwig, who had not by nature and never acquired, the faintest conception of the ways of business, of order in money-matters or regularity in conduct, is a mystery not easily fathomed.

Ludwig Devrient was a child of the second marriage;

but his mother, about whom we have no information, died in his infancy, and he was brought up by a shrewish French housekeeper, who had no sympathy whatever for the singular boy. He had a lonely time of it in the big house (Brüderstrasse 19) where his father lived and had his business; for his half-brothers were much older than he, and his sister, who was about the same age as himself, was brought up at a boarding-school. This loneliness no doubt fostered the peculiarity of his disposition and his habit of self-absorbed introspection, amounting almost to abnormality. His nephew, Eduard Devrient, tells us that he loved to be alone, and seldom played with other boys, but used to sit in a corner gazing straight in front of him with great, dark eyes, or talking eagerly to himself, uttering a great number of words, or mere sounds, without connection, and without meaning for anyone but himself; he, however, seemed deeply moved, sometimes even terrified, by them.

He was fond, too, of making the most frightful faces, to the terror of other children of his age, and particularly of his sister when she was at home for the holidays. His mere appearance was sufficiently singular. Coal-black hair, as soft as silk—he was exceedingly proud of his hair in later life, always keeping it in beautiful curl by the use of curl-papers;—unusually large brown eyes which glittered like brilliants in his pale thin face; an extremely mobile, thin-lipped mouth, whose expression would alter in a moment from the deepest melancholy to the most freakish gaiety; and finally a long hooked nose, much on one side, which gave the whole face, otherwise a handsome one, a stamp of bizarre irregularity.

Of school-going, indeed of lessons of any sort in the ordinary sense of the word, he was a determined and energetic opponent. On the other hand, he was quite fond of going to church, not for the sake of the consolations of religion—indeed he understood very little of what the French pastor said—but because he found in the services fresh material for his fantastic monologues. He would blacken his face, and climb up into the branches of the big tree that stood in the yard of his father's house; and from this improvised pulpit would pour forth, in the very accent



of the worthy French preacher, bewildering farragos of nonsense, garnished with extravagant gestures and frightful grimaces—to the no small edification of the youth of the neighbourhood.

Like Kean, he ran away from home; but while this spiritual kinsman of his got as far as Madeira, he—on this occasion—only reached Charlottenburg. He was sent to a boarding-school, and there distinguished himself by his gift for reciting verse. Gellert's *Fables*—by accident one may suppose—became his favourite pieces for recitation, and, whereas in all other subjects he was far behind boys of his own age, he impressed both his teachers and his schoolfellows by his assurance, and his intuitive, logically correct method, in handling these little moral essays in verse.

The time at length came when he was old enough to be apprenticed to his father's business. So far he would not seem to have shown any conscious inclination to become an actor. But he did show, at once, a very pronounced aversion from the ancestral trade, as well as a total unfitness for it. In an astonishingly short space of time he managed to be guilty of such a series of follies and blunders in business matters that his father, in righteous wrath, cut short his activities, and, not to have him hanging about at home as an idle ne'er-do-well, sent him off to be pupil in a trimming- and fringe-manufactory at Potsdam.

This, however, did not mend matters. He was, and would always be, a ne'er-do-well in all concerns of trade and business. Instead of covering buttons, or practising the other dexterities demanded of a diligent apprentice to the trimming-maker's trade, he employed himself in mimicking the master-trimmer's peculiar ways of speech—for he too belonged to the French immigrant colony—and for the rest was usually to be found at the little theatre, where he had gained admittance and the sympathies of the personnel by presenting the staff with handsome buttons and braid for their costumes, and the Director with splendid tassels and fringes for his curtains and table-cloths. Potsdam play-goers in general were most favourably impressed by the unwonted splendour of these appointments, the only



exception being the fringe- and trimming-maker, who, chancing to see them, at once recognized them as his own. On this Ludwig Devrient found it advisable to disappear from Potsdam, and a short time afterwards he was found by his eldest half-brother—who stood by him throughout, and who seems to have been the only person with some understanding of the troublesome youth's complexity of nature—in the service of an old woman who kept a village shop and who was employing him as her unwitting agent in smuggling provisions through the Customs. He was brought home again, only to disappear once more soon after. This time he enlisted as a soldier,—perhaps the worst blow he had yet inflicted on his respectable family, for in those days the status of the military profession in Prussia was the very reverse of what it is in our time.

When his good-natured brother Philip had got him out of this new scrape, the family decided to try a completely new plan with him by giving him his head as far as possible. He was sent to a branch establishment at Brody, managed by another of his half-brothers named Emanuel, and there given a semi-independent position, in which he had the handling of large sums of money.

This new experiment in reformatory education, however, had no better success than the others. He fell into bad company, becoming a frequenter of champagne-parties, where his fellow-revellers, Russian officers, fleeced the raw young trader at play, and taught him a love for the noble grape, which, developing with years, weakened his artistic powers and shortened his life. To get him away from this dissipated life, his brother Emanuel took him with him to the Leipzig Fair. And here, in Leipzig, he met his fate, in the person of the actor, Ochsenheimer.

Ludwig Devrient, now a youth of nearly twenty, had often enough seen plays acted—he had seen both Iffland and Fleck, for example, in Berlin—but it is clear that so far no acting had affected him with the deep feeling of kinship in personality now created in him by Ferdinand Ochsenheimer's<sup>1</sup> playing.

<sup>1</sup> Born at Mannheim 1767, died at Vienna 1822.



Ochsenheimer, indeed, though he never became a really great actor, was a sufficiently peculiar and individual type. He had gone on the stage late in life, having previously made a study of the natural sciences—he had, indeed, taken the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, and was an entomologist of real eminence. He published a work on *European Butterflies* which is said to be of considerable value, and he wrote also several popular plays under the *nom de guerre* of Theobald Unklar. At eight and twenty the fancy took him to become an actor, and when he crossed Devrient's path—very early in the nineteenth century—he belonged to a well-known company managed by Seconda, which played by turns in Dresden, Leipzig and Prague. He took the parts of villains, such as Franz Moor in *The Robbers*,<sup>1</sup> Marinelli in *Emilia Galotti*, Secretary Wurm in *Cabal and Love*,<sup>1</sup> etc.; and he brought to the performance of these characters a tall figure, lean as a rake, fantastic as one of Hoffmann's creations, and a face that seemed carved in wood and that was yet as flexible as gutta-percha. At this time he was at the summit of his artistic powers, and a few years later (1807) he obtained an engagement at the Vienna Burgtheater, where, it must be said, he soon fell off greatly, becoming mannered and exaggerated, and losing all power of fruitful study and original creation.

Such as he still was in these Leipzig days, however, the fantastic figures projected by him, full of cool malignity and diabolical in the naturalism of their facial play, produced a powerful effect upon young Devrient, making clear to him, of a sudden, what was his own real vocation—and the youth vanished once more from the ken of his family, but, this time, to find the true path.

He applied for employment to the Lange Company, one of the minor touring troupes, and made his début at Gera (18th May 1804) in their production of Schiller's *Braut von Messina*, as the Princess Isabella's messenger. He was no well-drilled actor of Goethe's school; he was, indeed, totally untrained, and even in this small character-

<sup>1</sup> Schiller's plays: *Die Räuber* and *Kabale und Liebe*.



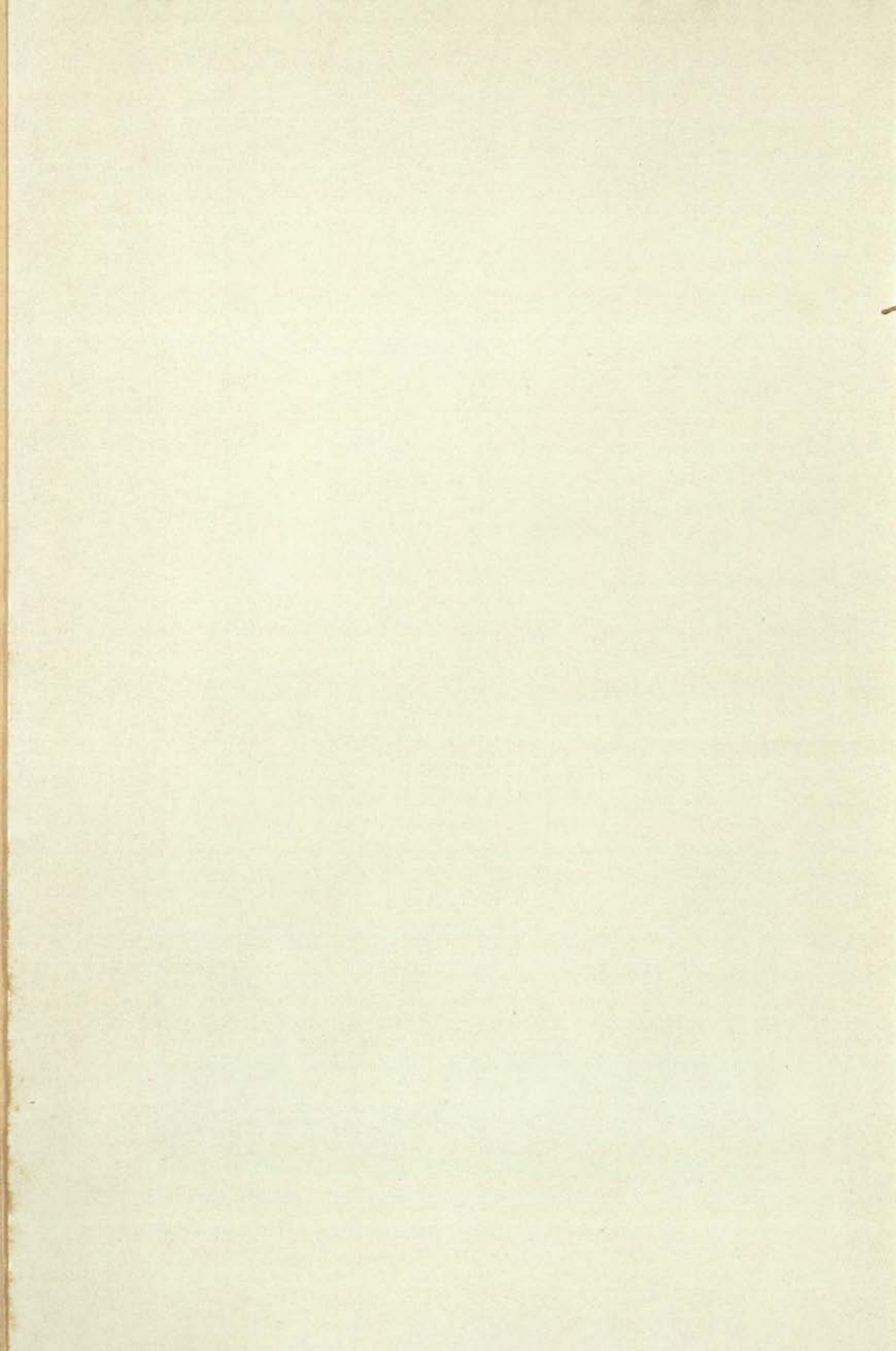
69.—Ochsenheimer as Wurm in *Kabaie und Liebe*.



70.—Devrient and Hoffmann in Lutter's Tavern (pp. 315 and 328).

[From a contemporary painting.]





less part, which exists merely to make a few brief reports, he was perfectly helpless. He delivered his reports quite inaudibly, and, as he said himself afterwards, felt as if he had two legs and one arm too many. The other arm was doubtless fully employed with the traditional staff which all classic 'messengers' had to carry. In some minor lovers' parts, which he next essayed, he got on no better; in one of them, indeed, he was hissed. He was beside himself with desperation, and was for leaving the theatre at once in the middle of the performance, never to set foot in it again.

The leading actor of the company, one Weidner, who in various ways had shown a certain interest in this awkward, passionate young beginner, persuaded him to listen to reason, and he stayed on. There was no danger of his bringing further disgrace on his family by this last foolish enterprise, since he had taken the precaution of appearing under the assumed name of Herzberg.

But indeed this unlucky tiro Herzberg, whom everyone now pronounced to be quite destitute of talent, was before long to have his revenge. Another actor of the company, who was playing a big comic part in *Das Donauweibchen*<sup>1</sup> (a folk-tale play by K. F. Hensler, very popular at the time) happened to fall sick, and Devrient, by his own wish and at very short notice, was put on as understudy to replace him. The rôle was a sort of Hanswurst<sup>2</sup>,—or rather Kasperl<sup>2</sup>-part, a drunken stroller named Kaspar Larifari. Devrient, who was ordinarily not much of a reader, had happened shortly before to get hold of Shakespeare's *Henry IV.*, and had gone wild with delight over the character of Falstaff. He did not dream for a moment that it would ever fall to his lot to play the magnificent Sir John, but he conceived the notion that in his presentation of the humble Kasperl-figure he might be able to embody something of the enthusiasm he felt for Shakespeare's immortal human type. And, to the intense astonishment of everyone, he succeeded in the attempt.

<sup>1</sup> *The Little Woman of the Danube.*

<sup>2</sup> See vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), pp. 19, 20, etc.



He seemed to be transformed. Not only in externals, though the extraordinary change in his appearance was no doubt what most impressed the great public. That this little, slender, pale creature could make himself over into a fat, jolly, bibulous buffoon, so as to create a perfect illusion, was what struck most people as showing his extraordinary talent. But for those who knew, and for himself, the important thing was that, whereas hitherto, in parts that any mediocrity could play with acceptance, he had been as helpless as a child, as timid and awkward as the most hopeless amateur, now that he had a definite imaginative picture to go by he all at once found himself free, assured, unhampered. In this part, which might have seemed as alien to his natural temperament as any part could be, his genius had begun of a sudden to lift him on its wings; he felt it, and was at once secure, bringing out his witticisms with the confidence of a practised comedian, and singing the comic ditties with which the part was studded to the delight of everyone and to the great astonishment of his fellow-players and of the manager, since ordinarily he had not a single note in his voice. "Der Kerl is verhext,"<sup>1</sup> they burst out. And, from this time forth, the day of juvenile 'lovers' and 'messengers' was past; young Herzberg had become a 'character-actor.' It remained, indeed, characteristic of him, even in the days of greatness that were to come, that he never could play any part well unless it shaped itself in his imagination into a definite figure that he could live with, as it were, and follow in his impersonation. A character of which he could frame no such picture—it did not need to be a fantastic picture, but must be one that took life in his fantasy—a part indifferent to him, one that demanded only dignity, or one of the ordinary 'hero' parts, Ludwig Devrient would play worse than the average hack performer; always in his artistry it was a case of 'all or nothing.'

The Lange Company was a very wretched affair, in which the actors were 'on a sharing basis,' as the players' *argot* had it, and which seldom had much to share. But

<sup>1</sup> "The fellow's bewitched."



after a year with them Devrient managed to get an engagement in a company of a much better class, the Bossan troupe, which at the time had a permanent 'stand' at Dessau, where there was some approach to regular theatrical conditions, and where Devrient received a fixed salary of six thalers<sup>1</sup> a week. Here he began a real study of his art. He had begun to realize how serious and how difficult a matter it was, and he strained every nerve to develop the powers he now felt himself to possess.

A friend whom he made in Dessau, a young bookseller and author named Kuntz, who wrote under the name of Funck, has left a description of Devrient's struggles to master his difficult art. It was at night, after the performance was over, that he usually practised. He was living at an inn, 'The Golden Ring,' and Kuntz, who was engaged to the landlord's daughter, often came up to his room and paid him a visit. "If he happened to be engaged on an interesting speech," writes Kuntz, "he took no notice of me, but went on to the end of the scene, pacing up and down the room in the ardour of his declamation. He was particularly delighted when he could get hold of the book, and I could go through the part with him, reading the intermediate dialogue, so that he could come in with his lines as his cues came round. These exercises went on till far on in the night, and he often shouted and raved so violently that I had to beg him for God's sake to stop, as he was disturbing the whole neighbourhood. But this always offended him very much.

"Devrient's studies at Dessau were not confined to the parts he was to play there; he worked at other characters too—characters he knew he should never act in Dessau. Among these were a number of parts in Shakespeare's pieces, particularly the King-plays" (presumably *King Richard III.* and *King Henry IV.*). "The part of King Philip in *Don Carlos*<sup>2</sup> he studied with quite special care. We went through the whole piece together twice. Devrient could not be induced to take any part but the King; the other parts I had to read; but it was a peculiar delight to me, one that to this day I cannot forget, when he chimed

<sup>1</sup> About eighteen shillings.

<sup>2</sup> Schiller's play



in at once on his cue, precisely in the spirit of his part, delivering the poet's splendid lines with an intonation that is indescribable, but that had in it something grim and sinister. Unfortunately I never saw his King Philip on the stage."<sup>1</sup>

But he had his dark hours too, when it seemed to him that he had no original talent and that all his labours were in vain. He was exceedingly impressionable and had a very marked natural turn for mimicry, which was a snare to him during his stage-novitiate. When another actor's performance of a part had impressed him strongly, he could not get rid of the impression when he came to play the part himself, or avoid making his performance a slavish copy of his forerunner in the part. He was conscious of this, and it tortured him exceedingly, so that he took no delight whatever in the popular success which had now come to him, and thought seriously at one time of throwing up the whole thing and going home to his father, who had written begging him to give up the theatre, promising to forget and forgive all, to pay his debts, and to welcome back the prodigal son with open arms.

It was Ochsenheimer in particular that he was always copying, and by whose mannerisms and intonations he was obsessed. When his father's letter arrived, he took counsel, in great anguish of spirit, with Kuntz, and as his friend was firm in holding that Devrient should on no account forsake his vocation, he determined to put himself to the test and abide by the result. He was to play Chancellor Flessel, in Iffland's *Wards*,<sup>2</sup> a part which he had seen played by others, but not to his satisfaction. If now, he found that he could make this character an original figure, with no taint of imitation about it, he would stick to acting, otherwise he would give it up. He stood the test; the stage kept him; and it is with this part that his independent development may be said to have begun. Once begun, it proceeded with such astonishing rapidity, that within a few years he stood out as, above all, the most *original*

<sup>1</sup> Funck: *From the Lives of two Players, Iffland and Devrient*, quoted by Höcker, p. 267.

<sup>2</sup> *Die Mündel*.

actor in Germany, the one whose distinguishing mark it was that the strange and living figures created by him seemed to spring direct from his own imagination, conforming to no existing school, and owing nothing to any previous stage-creation.

In the meantime his private life had been irregular in the extreme. His professional earnings were very small, and his outgoings, particularly his expenditure on fluid commodities, very large. His case was like Kean's. When he was despondent about his art, or worried over his debts, he sought a convenient tavern and forgot his cares in the company of good friends and with the aid of much good wine. If things were going well and he was feeling happy, the occasion was a good one for a jolly party and more good wine to make him feel happier still. It was not long before he had acquired the dangerous habit of having the bottle by him whatever might be his mood.

His friend of later days, E. T. A. Hoffmann, whose intimacy with him, not least when he was in his cups, was such as few others could boast, has given us in his *Seltsame Leiden eines Theaterdirectors*,<sup>1</sup> an excellent lightning sketch of Devrient's way of emptying bottle after bottle in pure nervous heedlessness, without any real satisfaction beyond the pleasure of getting drunk. The scene is a tavern in a provincial town; a man bursts in "in a fashionable grey frock-coat, hat on head, glasses on nose. 'Champagne, and a dozen oysters,' he shouted and . . . flung himself into a chair. He read the note he had in his hand, tore it across and stamped on it. Then he laughed aloud as if in frenzy of spirit, smote his forehead with his clenched fist, and muttered: 'They'll drive me mad, mad! Compared with my misery a galley-slave's life is a glorious one!' The waiter had brought the champagne, and the grey man hurriedly tossed off several glasses. The whole appearance of the grey man was such as to rouse the deepest compassion, the most heartfelt sympathy. He was yet but a young man in years, but his pale, emaciated face, the wild look in his eyes, the white hairs that gleamed forth here and there amid his dark locks, made him seem much older than,

<sup>1</sup> *Strange Sufferings of a Theatrical Director.*



to judge by his bearing and movements, he could possibly be. Presumably his purpose was to stupefy himself and so to forget at least for a moment his wretchedness, or some appalling event<sup>1</sup> that threatened him with annihilation; for he swallowed down glass after glass, and had already emptied the bottle and was calling for another when the waiter came with the oysters."<sup>2</sup>

There is much humour and keen observation in this little sketch, which, though its subject is left anonymous, is a picture of Ludwig Devrient in his moments of distraction. Just so would he sit muttering and mumbling to himself, much as in his boyhood, in the little back-room behind the druggist's shop at the corner of Schützen and Markgrafen streets in Berlin, when his spirits were so low that he could not bear even Lutter and Wegener's tavern and the company of his friend Hoffmann.

It was far from being the case, however, that his mood was always black like this; on the contrary, it would sometimes veer round to an almost childish gaiety, and then he abounded in the absurdest stories and in imitations of the many ridiculous people he had met, and would keep his hearers in a roar with his burlesque, fantastic faces.

## V

Ludwig Devrient at Breslau—Heinrich Anschütz—Breslau as a theatrical centre—Devrient as Franz Moor—His Lear and Shylock—His bodily weakness and his fantasy.

DURING his stay in Dessau Devrient's powers had been struggling towards full development. When he gave up his Dessau engagement—thereby committing a breach of contract—and joined the City Theatre at Breslau, he soon arrived at full artistic maturity, and it was probably during his Breslau period that he was at his best as an actor.

It was in the beginning of 1809, when he was in his twenty-sixth year, that he began his engagement in the

<sup>1</sup> The grey man's wretchedness is in reality due merely to the fact that he is Director of a theatre.

<sup>2</sup> E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Collected Works*, Berlin, 1845, x. 6.

second city of Prussia. He had married, in the Dessau years, a young actress, daughter of a conductor named Hefle, but his wife had died after a year's married life, and the marriage had no lasting effect either on his art or on his way of life.

In Breslau the conditions, both economic and artistic, were more favourable than any he had yet experienced. The theatre was the property of a local joint-stock company, and was managed by a Director, who held his post for a term of three years. In spite of this want of continuity, the management had hitherto been good, and the company, especially as regards its younger members, was much superior to the personnel of the other 'City Theatres.' It included the stately Julius, who later moved on to Dresden about the time Tieck settled there; Thürnagel, who afterwards, when a member of the Grand Duke of Baden's Court company, produced a very copious and for its time a quite creditable work on *The Theory of Theatrical Art*; Becker, from Goethe's Weimar company; the excellent comedian Schmelka (1780-1837); and finally Heinrich Eduard Anschütz (1785-1865), who became one of the best actors in Germany. Anschütz, however, did not join the Breslau company till 1814. At this time he was playing young lovers' and heroes' parts; in his later years he became one of the chief pillars of the Vienna Burgtheater in the older 'heroic' line of parts. His Lear, his Wallenstein, his Miller (in *Cabal and Love*) are still among the consecrated memories of the Burgtheater. In genius and extraordinary personality he could not compare with Ludwig Devrient, but in his own way he covered a wider field, since he had practically every style of acting at his command. Heinrich Laube says of him: "For forty years he was regarded as the mainstay of tragedy at the Burgtheater. And he was so indeed. He represented respect for the Word, the significant Word; he represented earnestness and conscientiousness, the conscientious care for the sense and spirit of the serious drama. He would never suffer any paltering where the dignity and importance of the theatre, the actor and the actor's calling were concerned. They were sacred to him."



Anschtütz and Devrient had made friends in earlier days, when the former was studying law at Leipzig, and Devrient was acting there with the Bossan company. Their friendship was renewed at Breslau, and continued unbroken until Devrient's death.

Breslau was at this time, on the whole, a place much in the intellectual movement, with strong literary and artistic interests; and young Devrient, who had much to gain by intercourse with men of talent, found there what he needed—the Director of the theatre, Councillor Streit, among others, was of use to him in this respect, and still more so the amiable and lively author-critic Karl Schall,<sup>1</sup> who was the centre of the intellectual society of the town, gathering round him every evening a circle of artists and literary men.

Ludwig Devrient made his first appearance in this lively city on the 9th February 1809 as Franz Moor in *The Robbers*. He had an instantaneous success, his reception, indeed, being most enthusiastic; and he was recognized from that time forward as what he was, an actor of genius and of extraordinary individuality, differing completely from anything seen before on the stage. His Franz Moor continued to be accounted, not only one of his best parts, but the standard and model for later performances of the character.

Iffland was the actual 'creator' of this character,<sup>2</sup> but though his rendering of it had brought him great fame, and he was still, in his later years, much applauded in it, his performance was completely eclipsed by this younger actor, who by his dæmonic power, his fantastic appearance, so precisely suited to this figure, and his delivery, highly individual, yet varying with the emotions of his part, lifted the character into a higher sphere than could ever be attained by Iffland's nicely-calculated, effective, but somewhat self-conscious virtuosity.

In his rendering of the part Devrient did nothing to

<sup>1</sup> Karl Schall (1780-1833) was the author of some of the light comedies most in vogue at this time, e.g. *Trau, schau, wem?* (played at the Copenhagen Royal Theatre—thirty times—under the title of *Trust none too much*), *Mehr Glück als Verstand* (*More Luck than Judgment*), etc. etc.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), p. 199.

emphasize the ugly, malformed exterior with which Schiller, with an eye to somewhat superficial theatrical effect, has invested his villain. Disdaining the aid of the hump and red hair, he appeared much as he was in real life, merely deepening slightly the markings round the mouth and eyes. But so vivid was the play of his countenance, that there gleamed from it an inward moral hideousness far more appalling than the bodily ugliness designed by Schiller.

Many have described this embodiment of Franz Moor as the very summit in tragedy of Devrient's art; Ludwig Rellstab, for instance, in a very circumstantial but at the same time perspicuous survey<sup>1</sup> of his acting, maintains this view. August Klingemann, in later days a well-known theatrical manager, gives us, in what is, by comparison, a brief analysis, a good impression of the powerful, thrilling effect produced on him, and indeed on all who saw it, by this performance. "From this point" (the third Act), he writes, "to the very end, Devrient soars higher and higher, scene by scene, on the wings of genius—fantasy mirrors itself in fantasy—and poet and player seem engaged in a tremendous struggle for the palm of art. The demons of crime throng in upon the criminal. . . . Murder creeps up behind him, and he starts in terror at the descending dagger. Then comes the scene with Daniel; the recital of the dream, in accents not of this world" (Rellstab says of this passage that he has never been able to forget the appalling effect of the tone in which Devrient uttered the words: "Well, why do you not laugh?"); "the prayer, in which the thoughts give the words the slip, and he speaks on mechanically as the terror of death mounts within him, till at last the words flicker away from his lips in disjointed sounds.—There was more than truth here—more than perfection of art; and the applause of the agitated crowd rose to an uproar, aye, to a clamour of shrieks!—Apart from all this, his facial play was in itself of such thrilling greatness; the eyes now flaming up in frenzy, now dying down into

<sup>1</sup> *Blumen und Ährenlese* (*Flower- and Corn-gleanings*), II: Ludwig Devrient, chap. 2.



hippocratic<sup>1</sup> ashiness in the collapse of utter desperation;—and then the wild, Gorgon-like hair, with its loose locks twining about his forehead and neck like the snakes of the Furies—all this, in terrifying combination, formed a picture projected and executed with Flaxman-like<sup>2</sup> boldness, immeasurably far removed from what is ordinarily called acting, so that everything else, in comparison, seemed but artifice and make-believe, and even Iffland's performance dwindled to a shadow in our recollections"<sup>3</sup>

The list of parts played by Devrient while at Breslau includes most of those which built up his renown, and which still, like the blazonings of a coat of arms, make his name illustrious. In 1810, when he was only twenty-six years old, he ventured to undertake a task that is one of the greatest and most difficult a player can attack—the part of King Lear; and though it was impossible, in the nature of things, that at this age he should be capable of a thorough understanding and complete solution of this gigantic problem—and though, indeed, he never succeeded in rendering all the phases of the character with equal power, as Fr. L. Schröder had done—yet even at this stage his performance was a worthy first sketch of what was to be one of his finest creations.

He had, indeed, the advantage of Schröder in one respect; whereas the elder actor had played in his own adaptation<sup>4</sup> of the tragedy, Devrient produced, for the first time in Germany, Shakespeare's own text, in A. W. Schlegel's excellent translation. The weak point in Devrient's creation (a point in which, given his temperament and his physical means of expression, it was inevitable that it should be weak) was his lack of commanding presence and of volume and sonority of voice—its defects, in short, were physical rather than spiritual. It was beyond his power—especially, of course, in his younger years—to

<sup>1</sup> The sunken, flaccid appearance sometimes presented by the features of patients suffering from severe diseases of the digestive organs is called by doctors *facies hippocratica*.

<sup>2</sup> The reference is to the English sculptor, John Flaxman (1755-1826), whose illustrations of Aeschylus, Homer, Dante, etc., were in those days very famous in Germany.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Monty Jacobs: *Deutsche Schauspielkunst*, p. 118 seq.

<sup>4</sup> See vol. v. (*Great Actors of the Eighteenth Century*), p. 165.



71.—Heinrich Ludwig Schmelka  
(p. 317).

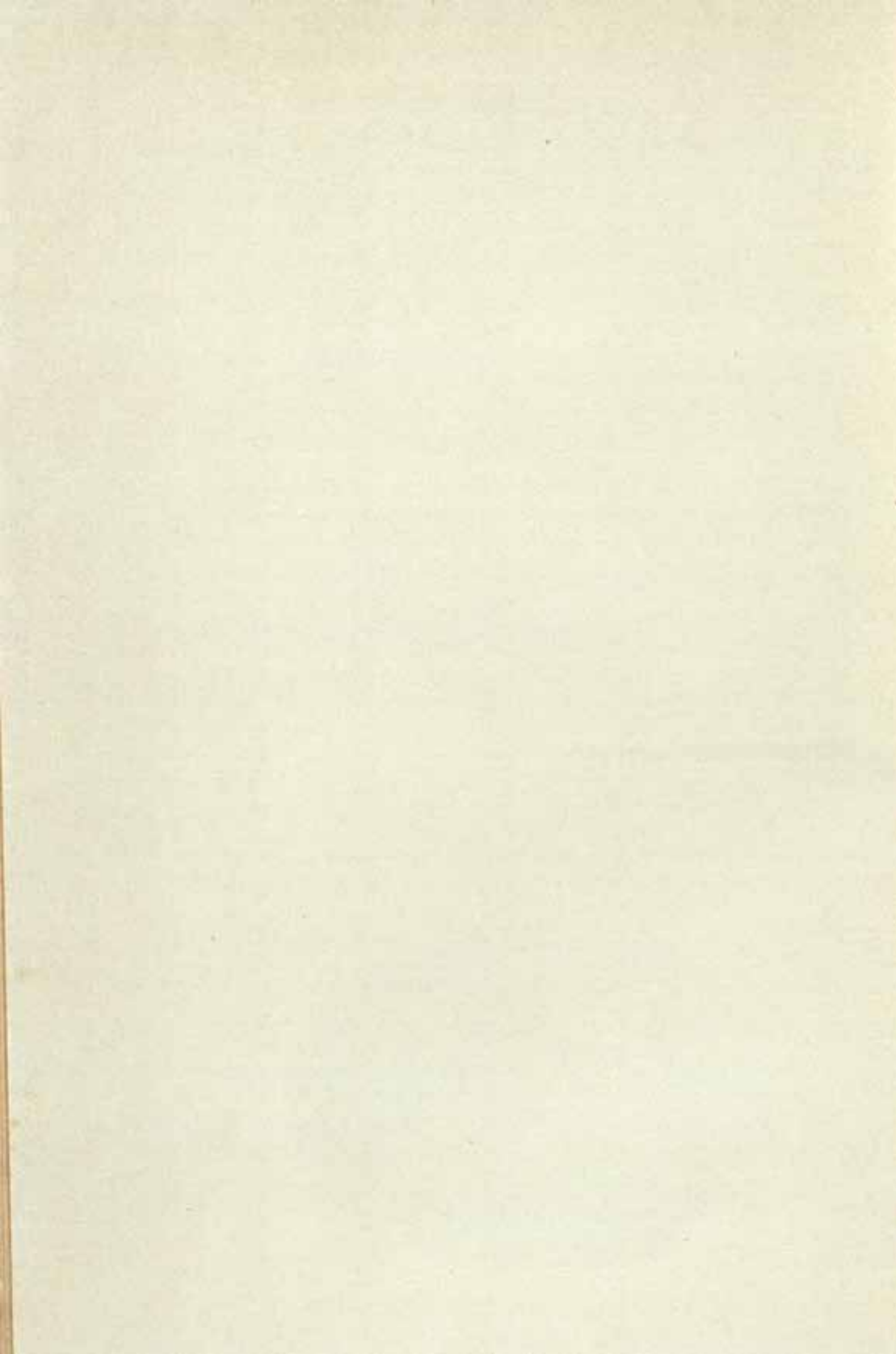


72.—Eduard Devrient  
(p. 325).



73.—Ludwig Devrient  
(p. 320).





body forth the gigantic figure of a Colossus of heathen antiquity, struggling, tottering and falling under the heavy blows of Fate; but the portrayal of a human being, a great, childish-vain but yet loving man, tortured by impotent tenderness and pierced by icy-hearted cruelty, slipping gradually down the descent from senile frenzy to heart-rending madness, was well within the compass of his art, and it was on this element of humanity that he based his performance.

Naturally and inevitably it was the most passionate passages, the scenes of threatening madness, and most of all the scene where madness has broken out in full force, in which Devrient was most successful. Kingly dignity of exterior and large pathetic utterance were not his forte. But he brought out, too, with great art the milder, more tender-hearted side of the old monarch, and in particular played the exquisite scene in which Cordelia's gentle voice calls back the old man's wandering senses, with thrilling truth to nature.

Ludwig Rellstab says of his Lear: "Devrient, who was always a consummate master in the art of make-up, had moulded for himself in this part one of the noblest old-man's heads I have ever seen. His face showed every sign of the intensely passionate temper which of old must have completely dominated his soul, and which even yet had not entirely left it. But in the midst of his easily-roused anger there shone forth an inextinguishable gleam of good-will and loving-kindness, always reappearing, like a glimpse of blue sky, after the most violent storms of passion, if only as a smile shining through the deepest grief of his distracted soul. . . . Sometimes he would pass his hand, in weariness and despondency, over his bald forehead, as if he would brush away the crushing weight of sorrow from his brain. At the words: "*I would not be mad*," spoken with this gesture, a cold shudder ran through the audience, as they saw, with him, the awful, inexorable spectre of madness glide forth from the gloomy background and, laying a hand upon him, mark him as its destined victim."<sup>1</sup>

Endowed with sensibility of an acuteness bordering on

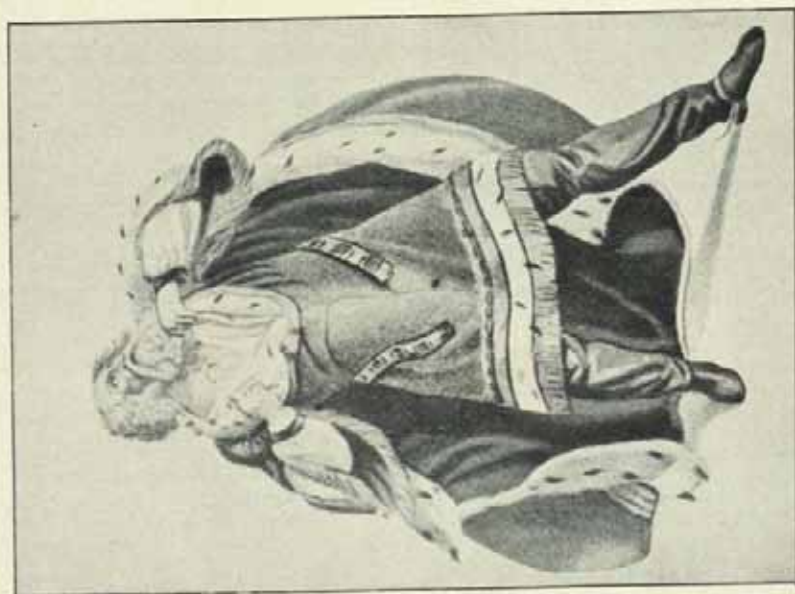
<sup>1</sup> L. Rellstab: *Blumen und Ährenlese*, ii. 356 seq.



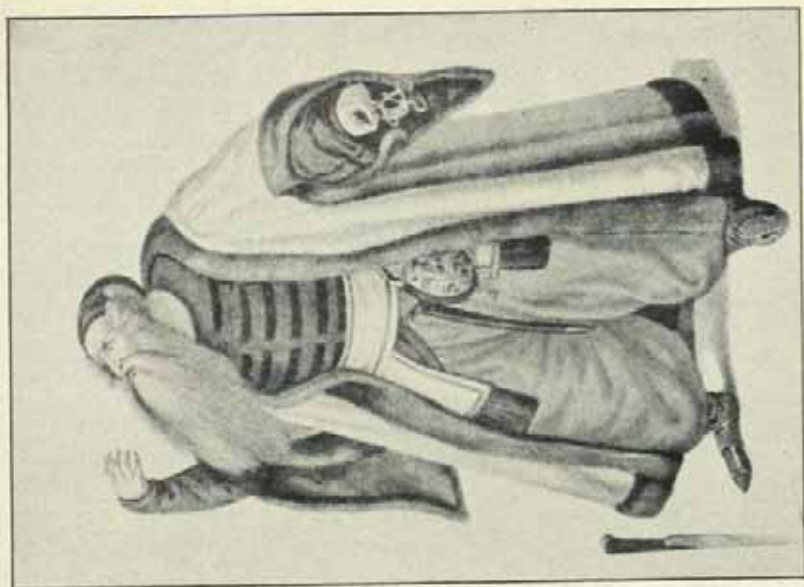
disease, and with the power of throwing himself with a devouring passion into the parts of a rôle which suited his temperament, Devrient succeeded in producing a picture of Shakespeare's legendary figure, which, though far from complete, yet was, for all good judges, of far more thrilling effect than the performances of his contemporaries—men like Esslair<sup>1</sup> and Anschütz—whose physical equipment was better suited to the part.

The fact remains, however, that this most exacting of all parts was beyond Devrient's *bodily* powers. Not once, but many times, it happened that as early as the end of the second Act (the proper playing of which, it is true, involves almost superhuman mental strain and physical exertion) he fell down in a sort of epileptic fit, and was obliged either to break off the performance altogether, or to give up for the rest of the evening all attempt to play with his full force. Karl von Holtei, who was born and brought up at Breslau, gives in his reminiscences the following account of a performance of *Lear* which he witnessed when a boy of thirteen: "Devrient played with overwhelming, violent exaltation; it seemed to me that the emptiness of the house spurred him on to exert himself trebly, in sheer defiance. After the second Act there was a long wait. At last the stage-manager came before the curtain, and informed the small audience that Herr Devrient had fallen down in a fit, and was quite unable to go on acting. The evening's performance must therefore unavoidably be considered at an end. The audience left quietly. I ran about in the street outside, driven by a deadly fear, keeping my eyes

<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand Esslair (1772-1840) was, in his day, though not the greatest, yet certainly the tallest actor in Germany. He was a handsome and stately man, of gigantic size—his height, indeed, was an inconvenience to him, particularly in his youth. When he applied for an engagement at the National Theatre in Munich, the Director rejected him, giving as his reason that there were no clothes in the wardrobe that would fit 'the lanky rascal.' When Genast suggested to Goethe that he should be engaged for the Weimar theatre, the reply was: "I have no use for a lover whose mistress' head would only reach to his middle." In time, however, he acquired a considerable reputation; and he possessed, indeed, a somewhat pompous talent, which many people found impressive. But he developed serious mannerisms of style, and his ill-concealed enjoyment of his own stately appearance always prevented his identifying himself with the characters he presented.

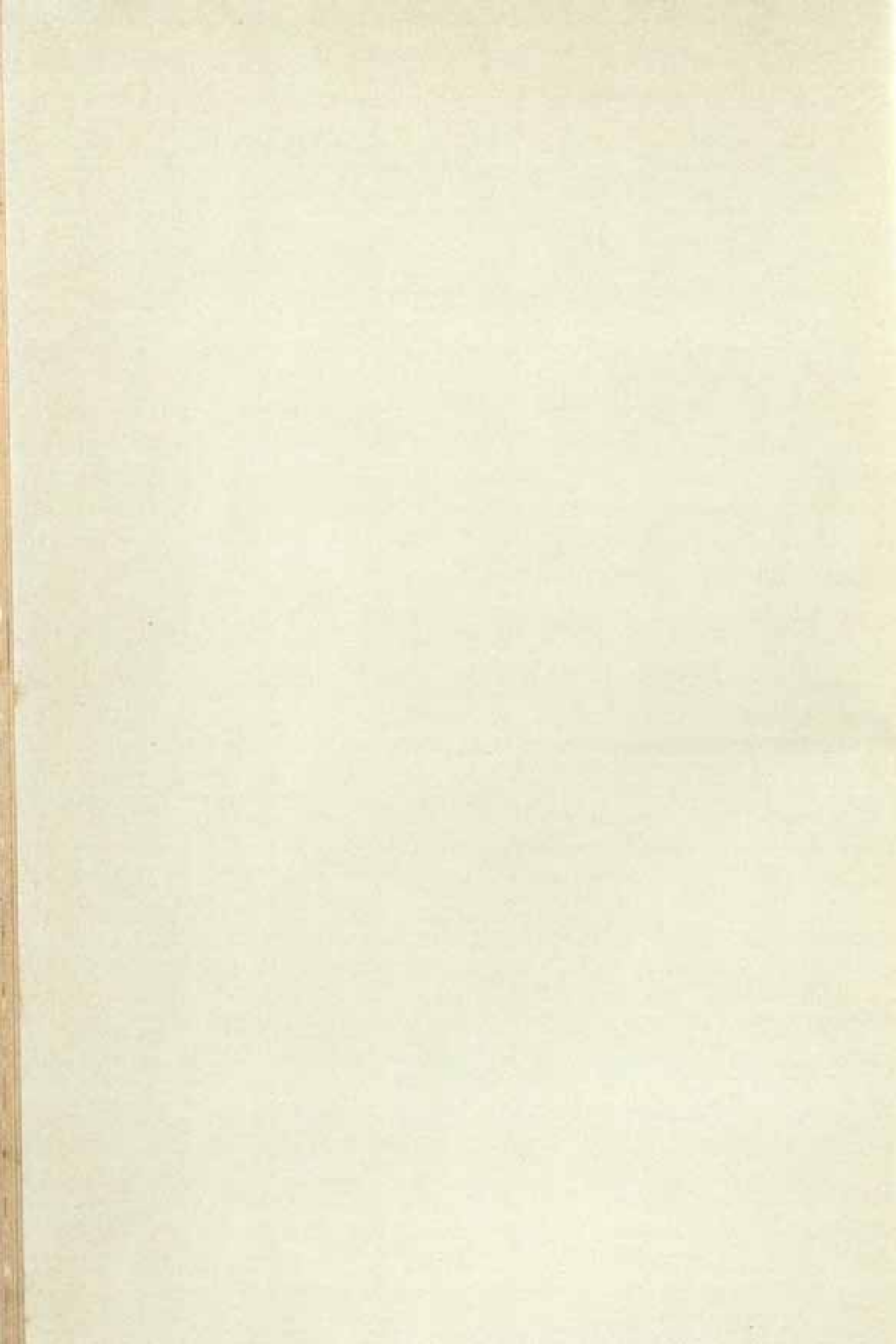


74.—Ludwig Devrient as King Lear (p. 321).



75.—Ludwig Devrient as Shylock (p. 323).





on the door by which the actors went out and in. . . . At last they brought him out, still dressed, in part, in the old king's costume. It was a strange scene. The disordered clothing, the pale face, the bright daylight" (it was in the summer) ". . . it was as if they were carrying a dead man from the battle-field."<sup>1</sup>

This was in 1811. It is not surprising that in such circumstances as these Devrient was led away into the practice of using strong stimulants to keep up his strength. He early fell into this destructive habit, which of course only served in the long run to exasperate his nervous weakness, though at times it might be of some momentary assistance.

Eight years later he was 'starring' at Hamburg—in this same part—under the management of F. L. Schmidt; and we read in the manager's *Denkwürdigkeiten*: "In *King Lear*, on the 8th July" (1819) "Devrient was only able to get as far as the scene with Régan in the second Act. He was by that time in such a convulsively hysterical state that he had to be taken off, and the curtain rung down. The actor was soon revived, however, by draughts of strong spirits, which he hastily gulped down; the curtain was rung up again and the Act played on to the end. But by that time Devrient's strength was completely exhausted, and he collapsed. For him to go on playing was quite out of the question; so we improvised a performance of Körner's *The Bride*. But even at that time we all felt sure that Devrient would come to a sad end."<sup>2</sup>

In his later years he had to give up the part of Lear altogether, since it always wore him out completely before he had reached the end of the play.

On the other hand, throughout the part of Shylock, which is not more than one-fourth the length of Lear, his mastery was complete. Shylock, and Jewish parts in general, such, for instance, as Sheva in Cumberland's *Jew*,

<sup>1</sup> *Karl von Holtei: Vierzig Jahre (Forty Years)* quoted by Höcker: *Vorbilder der deutschen Schauspielkunst (Types of German Theatrical Art)*, p. 293 seq.

<sup>2</sup> F. L. Schmidt: *Denkwürdigkeiten (Memorabilia)*, ii. 128.



became one of Devrient's specialties. His keen powers of observation, his mimetic talent, and his sense for grotesque comedy, enabled him to render to a nicety the specifically Jewish type, without the least exaggeration, or mingling of the individual peculiarities of one Jew with those of others in an amateurish generalized jargon. His Shylock resembled Kean's in many respects, particularly in its wealth of delicate shading, and the sharply individualized character that was common to both. But the types of individual presented were exceedingly diverse. Kean played Shylock as a powerful middle-aged man with black hair, while Devrient represented him as grey and old—in the last scene quite broken down—and with strongly-marked Oriental race-characteristics. At Breslau he had ample opportunities for studying Jewish types, for the town was then, as it still is, full of Polish and Hungarian Jews, and we may be sure that from the ethnological point of view the picture was truly coloured. It is quite possible, however, as Tieck maintained, that in other respects the figure presented by Devrient transgressed the bounds of reality, that he made it too fantastic, too spectral and sinister. In his costume, which was much praised by his contemporaries, the Oriental character was also emphasized—he believed himself that it exactly reproduced the dress of the Venetian Jew of the Renaissance period. This can hardly have been altogether the case; but it is undeniable that his dress was far more stimulating to the imagination than the eighteenth-century citizen's costume in which Shylock was presented by Kean, who conformed, in this respect, to the common practice of the time.

In principle, Devrient had no intention whatever of forsaking the firm ground of reality in his impersonations. He heartily detested the conventional 'beauty'-theory of Goethe's school; throughout his career the human figures created by him were built up, by means of intense, serious application, from personal impressions and observations. It was only that he ordinarily saw human beings in a glaring, fantastic light; and accordingly the impression they made on him, whether tragic or comic, had always a tinge of strangeness and morbidity.



His nephew, Eduard Devrient, who had a very special understanding of and sympathy for his uncle, though he himself was an actor of a very different and greatly inferior type, writes of him in a striking passage: "His study of a part consisted of incessant intercourse with the imaginary human figure which he had discovered and chosen for that part. He associated with this figure with the greatest pleasure to himself and with real tenderness. He did not mould the image of his fantasy; he did not deck it out with traits of detail—no, he observed its traits day by day, they came to him as discoveries, filling him with heartfelt joy, which he felt the strongest need to communicate to others. Thus, when the time came, he appeared before the public in the very image itself, with which, by living with it, he had identified himself. . . . His playing was extraordinarily full of effect, of glowing colour; the modesty of nature, for which Schröder's creations were remarkable, was not his. His characters, on the contrary, were strongly marked; they betrayed in their creator a method of apprehension nervous and strained to the utmost, and often came within a hair's breadth of the borders of exaggeration, which he yet, with self-assured strength, managed to avoid touching—but all this was absolutely natural to him; he *saw* human beings as he represented them; no thought of *making an effect* entered his mind."<sup>1</sup>

It would scarcely be possible to give a clearer description than this of Devrient's method of work. At any rate every true actor must find it clear; for it is the method that is followed, and must necessarily be followed, by all great impersonators of human beings, even though they may not always be conscious of it. The difference in the results produced is due merely to differences of temperament, and the consequent difference in the nature of the association between the performer and the images of his fantasy.

Fantasy does not consist in behaving fantastically; still less in incoherent grimaces and "eyes in frenzy rolling"; though, strangely enough, many people, not a

<sup>1</sup> Eduard Devrient: *Geschichte der deutschen Schauspielkunst* (*History of German Theatrical Art*), iii. 361 seq.



few of them professional dramatic critics, believe the contrary. F. L. Schröder, we may be perfectly sure, had artistic fantasy of the same kind as Devrient's; but he had an unusually wholesome and vigorous temperament, while Devrient's was morbid, neurasthenic, super-sensitive. Hence the immense difference in the results arrived at, even when they played the same parts, and even though they had used the same artistic methods in fashioning their creations; and herein, let us remark in passing, may be found a proof of the independent creative activity of theatrical art, as distinct from the art of dramatic poetry.

## VI

Iffland and Devrient—Devrient in Berlin—E. T. A. Hoffmann—Devrient's comic parts—His increasing weakness.

A TURNING-POINT in Devrient's theatrical career came with Iffland's visit to Breslau in 1814, on his last 'starring' tour. He played with Devrient, and saw and recognized his great talent; indeed, stranger and 'star,' and immensely looked-up-to as he was, he yet had reason to feel, when he played in Devrient's rôles, what unique popularity this young rival of genius had acquired in the second capital of Prussia.

Iffland, who was already in very bad health, and was no doubt aware that he was nearing his end, treated his fellow-artist in the friendliest and most straightforward fashion. When taking leave of him at the end of the visit, he said: "People accuse me of being envious and jealous of other men's talent. But no one who has really known me will assert this. It is true that with empty conceit and self-satisfied mediocrity I have always been curt and repellent enough; but I have never refused to recognize genius. A man who is a real master of his craft is not afraid of one who is his peer. The contest between them strengthens both. Even a defeat is more honourable to the loser than a victory over ten blockheads.—I tell you, Devrient, you can never become a great artist—you *are* one already! The reputation you enjoy in Breslau is



enviable; but it is not enough to satisfy the ambition of a genius like you. The only place that is worthy of you is in Berlin. That place—I feel it too well—will soon be vacant. It is reserved for you. Rely upon my word!"<sup>1</sup>

And Devrient found that the word of the old actor-manager could be relied on. When Iffland died the year after—22nd September 1814—he had paved the way for Devrient's engagement, which took place in due course in the spring of 1815, under Count Brühl's management.

He was only thirty-one years old when he came to Berlin, but he had already reached full maturity as an artist. Berlin seems to have taught him, as a player, little or nothing, but it was there that he acquired his great renown. All the artistic triumphs to which he was to attain, he had already achieved, or was ready to achieve, but he found for them in the great city the sounding-board which, in spite of all his successes and the recognition he had won, had hitherto been lacking. He came at a time when Romanticism was at its brightest, and when Berlin was its focus. Peace was concluded, Germany was delivered, Napoleon, the oppressor, was irrevocably crushed. Berlin was revelling in nationalism, romanticism, prosperity, and artistic interests. The Jewish salons—of which Rahel Levin's was the first and foremost—inoculated upper middle class society with an interest in the theatre and in literature hitherto unknown; and from this time forward the Jews have continued to form the best, most passionately interested, and most judicious element in the Berlin theatrical audiences—till in our own days they have crossed the footlights and taken almost complete possession of the Berlin stage.<sup>2</sup>

The literary salons, it is true, saw little of Devrient. Literary salons were not his affair. In ordinary conversation he was quite out of his element; being very silent and reserved, except when among his intimate friends and comrades. But he found another means of access to the

<sup>1</sup> Höcker: *Vorbilder der deutschen Schauspielkunst*, p. 305 seq.

<sup>2</sup> To the best of my knowledge there is at the moment (1916) not a single Berlin theatre of any importance in which the management is not in Jewish hands, and it is believed that more than half the actors of Germany belong to the same gifted race.



inmost circles of the new literary movement, in his acquaintance with E. T. A. Hoffmann, who settled in Berlin at the same time as Devrient, after a youth spent in a great variety of employments, ranging from judicial functionary to orchestral conductor and scene-painter at minor theatres. He was now a judge of the Exchequer Court in Berlin, and was distinguishing himself as an acute and right-minded jurist, opposing, with much energy and sagacity, the disgraceful system of espionage and oppression set up by the Government after the 'War of Liberation.' At the same time he was developing great activity as author and composer.<sup>1</sup> There was a spiritual affinity between the two men, which was soon to grow into a deep and passionate friendship.

Hoffmann lived immediately opposite the theatre in a house at one corner of the *Gendarmenmarkt*<sup>2</sup>; and at another corner of the same square there stood, and still stands, Lutter and Wegener's Tavern. It was in these two corner houses that Hoffmann and Devrient established their 'literary salon,' which, it must be admitted, was of a nature very different from the parties for tea and romantic chit-chat so famous in literary history, which at this time formed the usual rallying places for the *beaux esprits* of Berlin. A veritable cycle of legends has grown up around these Hoffmann-Devrient symposia, at which tea and teatable talk were certainly not the attractions: legends of the fabulous mystifications and hoaxes by means of which Hoffmann and Devrient scared away inconvenient fellow-guests and listeners; or of how, when Devrient's bill for champagne had run up to some 4000 marks and the landlord was struck by the strange idea that he would like to have his money, the offended guest shook the dust off his feet, and transferred his patronage to another tavern, taking with him the inn's whole clientèle of regular guests and casual listeners, so that Messrs Lutter and Wegener had to beg and implore him to come back and to think no more

<sup>1</sup> In 1815 he wrote the music for *Thassilo, de la Motte Fouqué's* festival play for the Centenary of the House of Hohenzollern; and the next year his opera, *Undine*, was produced with great success.

<sup>2</sup> He has left a description of his abode and of himself in his charming little sketch: *From my Cousin's Corner-window*.

of the slight misunderstanding that had come between them. We have no means of verifying these legends, and we know, of course, still less of the nature of the intimate colloquies kept up by the two friends, with none but their bottles for company, till far on in the morning. Of the gatherings of poets at Hoffmann's house we know a little more. Among others, Oehlenschläger, who for some time belonged to the circle, has given us an account of one of these 'Serapion evenings'<sup>1</sup> at which it happened that he and Fouqué were the only guests. He describes Hoffmann as "a burlesque, fantastic elf with a great deal of sense"; the company tell each other blood-curdling ghost-stories and creepy adventures; and Hoffmann officiates as cook, with a white apron on, mixing them bowls-full of champagne and Rhenish, and seeing to it that the goblets are industriously filled and emptied. He has a whole cupboard-full of marionette dolls, which he loves to put through their paces, and in the middle of a horrible story he terrifies Oehlenschläger by making a little black devil suddenly perch astride his shoulder and peer into his face, putting out a red tongue at him.

The two friends were soon well-known figures in Berlin, not only as men who, in their several lines of art, were doing work akin in character, work that was creating a stir and having great success; but also because of their peculiar appearance and way of life. Hoffmann was very short and rather square-built, Devrient somewhat taller and very slender; but both had black hair and pale sallow complexions, with dark, brilliant eyes. Both were married,<sup>2</sup> but were seldom to be seen in company with their wives; nearly always, when not at work, they were to be found at the tavern that lay so handily for both of them, in copious, ironic discussion of the burning questions of the hour, theatrical, literary and artistic.

It is much to be regretted that Hoffmann never felt any impulse towards dramatic writing—no doubt because he

<sup>1</sup> *Serapionsbrüder* (*The Serapion Brethren*) is the title of a well-known collection of tales by Hoffmann, of which a brotherhood founded in honour of an imaginary hermit, Serapion, forms the frame-work. (Trans. note.)

<sup>2</sup> Devrient had married again; this time, too, his wife was an actress of no mark.



lacked the power; for it would be difficult to imagine a closer, more intimate association of dramatist and actor than would have resulted had Devrient impersonated Hoffmann's figures, compact of fantasy and yet always with their feet on the solid earth. As it was, the dramatic literature of the time yielded no material that was wholly suited to Devrient's peculiar artistic powers.

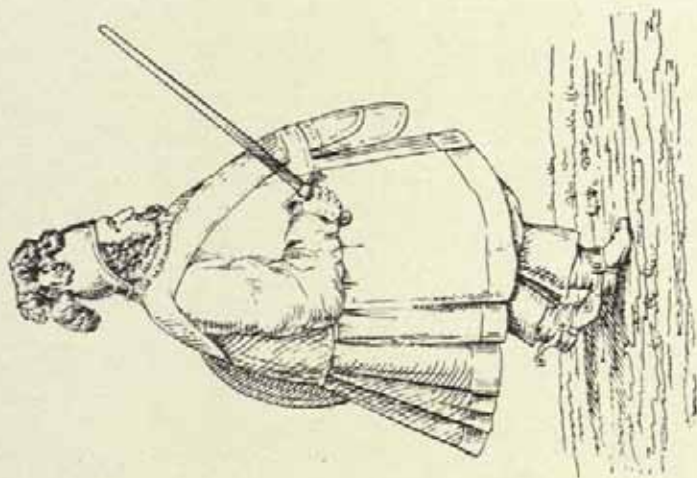
He made his first appearance in Berlin (April 1815), as Franz Moor, and immediately produced the same profound impression he had made elsewhere, being recognized, practically at once, as an actor of the first eminence. No more than two years later he was appointed stage-manager—for comedy; while P. A. Wolff, who—with his wife, *née* Amalie Malcolmi—had come to Berlin about the same time as Devrient, took over the stage-management in tragedy. At the time, this arrangement may perhaps not have seemed so strange as it now appears to us. Before he left Breslau Devrient had already played a great number of comic parts to the immense satisfaction of his audiences; apart from such rôles as Harpagon (*l'Avare*), which bordered on serious character-acting, most of these were the figures of sheer burlesque, which formed a popular element in the light pieces then in vogue but now utterly forgotten. He had an extraordinary vein of burlesque humour, an astonishing gift for disguise, and a great mastery of local dialects. His range in comedy was exceedingly wide; he played, for instance, both Harpagon and Falstaff, and was almost equally admired in both characters—perhaps, if anything, his Falstaff was the more successful of the two, though the part might have seemed beforehand utterly unsuited both to his physique and to his temperament. One of his most effective parts was in *The Triplets*,<sup>1</sup> in which he played all three brothers, and, Rellstab says: "It almost passed belief, the chameleon-like agility with which he slipped into, and out of, the skins of these three characters." He played in pieces so slight that it is hardly worth the trouble, at this time of day, to trace them out—the "*Possen mit Gesang*"

<sup>1</sup> A "*Posse mit Gesang*" (vaudeville) adapted from the French of Bonin by the Vienna actor Costenoble.

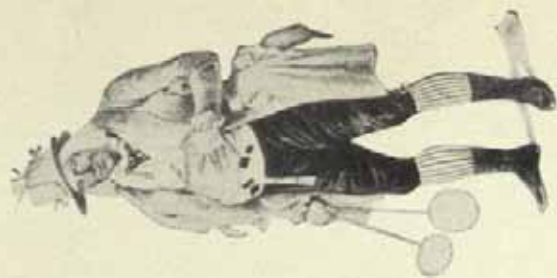


76.—E. T. A. Hoffmann  
(p. 328).

(From a drawing by himself.)



77.—Ludwig Devrient as Falsaff  
(p. 330).



78.—Seydelmann  
as Baron Scarabocus  
(pp. 331-2).





(vaudevilles) which in those days had a place in the repertoires of even the most fastidious German theatres. The names of his parts are enough to indicate the character of the plays: Rochus Pumpnickel, Fips the Tailor, Kakadu the Tailor, Baron Scarabæus, and the like.<sup>1</sup>

Devrient was indeed as much at home in comedy as in tragedy, but it is obvious that his tragic work had by far the greater importance, since in tragedy he had introduced a new and exceedingly original method. But this, of course, his new Chief, Count von Brühl, had no eyes to see. He was a blind partisan of the Weimar school, of which P. A. Wolff was the most elegant representative; and he accordingly put tragedy under Wolff's supervision, while comedy fell to Devrient. There was, in fact, a strong disposition on Brühl's part, in which Wolff shared, to confine Devrient, even in acting, within the sphere of comedy and light popular plays; this tendency on their part being due, not so much to the reason assigned—viz., that tragic parts told so heavily on his strength that he often fell ill after playing them—as to the fact that these votaries of convention and tediousness had no understanding whatever of his highly individual tragic temperament. Thus weeks and months might go by without Devrient's appearing in anything but empty German farce and vaudeville, so that even an expert in things theatrical like Oehlenschläger, when on a long visit to Berlin, considers him wholly and solely as a comic actor.<sup>2</sup>

The absurdity of this procedure was made all the more

<sup>1</sup> The first is the title-rôle in a "musical quodlibet in three Acts" by Matthäus Stegmayer, who, at his death in 1820, was Director of the Court Opera in Vienna. Kakadu is a character in a comic opera by Perinet and Wenzel Müller, *The Two Sisters of Prague* (1794). Baron Scarabæus is a naturalist and original (in *The Interrupted Game of Whist*), whose 'comic effects' include the wearing of bird-cages on his stomach and butterflies stuck in his straw hat. Fips the Tailor is the hero of a one-act piece of the same name by Hotzebue.

<sup>2</sup> He writes in his *Reminiscences* (iii. 196): "He (Hoffmann) and Hitzig the bookseller invited me . . . to dinner at a restaurant, where I also met Berlin's greatest comedian, Devrient. I have seen him play a French valet instructing a German coachman in a most imposing manner over a bottle of wine which they were discussing together, sitting at a little table. (I have forgotten the name of the piece.) It was the most ridiculous scene conceivable. Never can stupid superciliousness and idiotic airs have been taken off in more delicious fashion. All the airs and graces caricatured, and yet the whole thing had a touch of French nonchalance that was admirable."



glaring by the fact that the company was exceedingly weak in tragic character-actors, indeed in capable tragedians of every kind. The only actor who could conceivably play Devrient's line of parts in tragedy—he did actually play some of them—was Friedrich Wilhelm Lemm (1782-1837) a realistic actor of Iffland's school, precise to the verge of mania. He was not without talent, but his tragedy was quite devoid of impetus; and he imagined that he could make good his lack of bodily and mental agility by painstaking and minute private study, in the course of which he noted down in writing every shade of intonation, every movement of hand or foot, every turn of the body or the head, even every blink of the eyelids. It was natural enough that such thoroughness as this in externals should commend itself to a section of his compatriots; but a talent so ponderous, so laborious and at the same time so lacking in taste could not compare for a moment with Devrient's.<sup>1</sup>

P. A. Wolff was an actor of taste, but somewhat lacking in vigour, and was a slavish follower of the principles instilled by Goethe's training, the thoroughness of which was also of a purely external kind, and manifested itself mainly in the production of thoroughly tedious results. His wife, who was quite as well trained as he, but was less distinguished for taste, was a tragic actress of great comic talent.

It was no wonder that Devrient, who was, and was conscious of being, the only true representative of tragedy in the company of the Berlin theatre, grew dispirited and embittered when he saw that his powers remained unappreciated by the narrow-minded management. At the same time he was incapable of taking a strong line and asserting his rights. He was by nature indisposed to conflicts of this kind, and, besides, he was invariably disarmed by Count Brühl's personal amiability. Three great creations—Iago, Mephistopheles and Richard III.—

<sup>1</sup> A similar painful, brooding search for absolutely correct realistic expression was also a characteristic of Karl Seydelmann (1795-1843), an actor much admired by a somewhat later generation of playgoers. His career, however, falls outside the purview of this book.



lay ready in his mind, waiting to see the light. He had laboured at all three of them for years, their images were full-formed in his imagination; for Richard he had even worked out a complete acting arrangement, with Hoffmann's assistance. The two first characters, which he might have been born to play, he was never allowed to appear in, and his first appearance in *Richard III.* did not take place till 1828, only four years before his death. It had been postponed and postponed—intentionally as it would seem—till he was, physically, a broken man, and could only produce a mere sketch of the richly-coloured picture that he assuredly had in his mind's eye. Even this sketch, however, sufficed to show the public, through the veil of physical weakness, how much they had lost through a dilettante nobleman's narrow-minded obstinacy.

E. T. A. Hoffmann, his best friend, and the confidant of all his artistic troubles, died in 1822,<sup>1</sup> and his loss was a very severe blow to Devrient. The story goes that after his friend's death he sat in Lutter's tavern till far on in the night, alone, brooding over his wine and his thoughts. At last he put a couple of bottles of champagne in the pockets of his coat and wandered out to Hoffmann's grave, where he sat down with his bottles and spent the rest of the night in long, fantastic colloquies with the dead man, staggering home in the early morning.

His whole way of living became more and more ruinous to his health and constitution. Instead of resting during the vacation, he undertook long, exhausting 'starring' tours, on which he only managed to keep himself going by perpetual recourse to his panacea—champagne. His old friend and colleague, Anschütz, who was now one of the chief pillars of the Vienna Burgtheater, visited him in Berlin, soon after Hoffmann's death, and was shocked to see how terribly he had changed in the seven years<sup>2</sup> since their last meeting. "His eyes shone as darkly brilliant as ever," he writes in his *Reminiscences*, "but their fire seemed almost unearthly; his whole

<sup>1</sup> He was only forty-six at his death; and the end of his life was clouded by weakness and disease.

<sup>2</sup> They had parted at Breslau in 1815.



appearance showed every sign of premature decay, a sad result of his recourse to constant wine-drinking to stimulate the ruined nerves. I told him how much I wished that he would come to Vienna some time on a 'starring' visit. He answered, shaking his head with a sorrowful smile: 'Yes, indeed, there is nothing I should like so much; but I haven't the courage for it any more. You see, I'm at home here; everyone is fond of me, and they bear with my bodily weaknesses. When I fumble about awkwardly with my crooked fingers<sup>1</sup> in lifting a glass to my mouth on the stage, or let a letter fall by mistake, they pretend not to see it. The soil your Burgtheater works in is too responsive. The Vienna people are too easily set a-laughing at any effect that goes wrong, and after all it would hurt me if anything of that sort should happen to me in my old age.' Anschütz had to go home without getting anything more definite from Devrient about the Vienna visit than that he "would think it over."

But the thought must evidently have struck his fancy. He had played in most of the larger towns of Germany. But the Vienna Burgtheater had by this time already come to be, in the estimation of all, what it still<sup>2</sup> is: the premier theatre of the German-speaking countries; and to show his artistic powers on its boards was no doubt an object of ambition that Devrient was fain to achieve before he died.

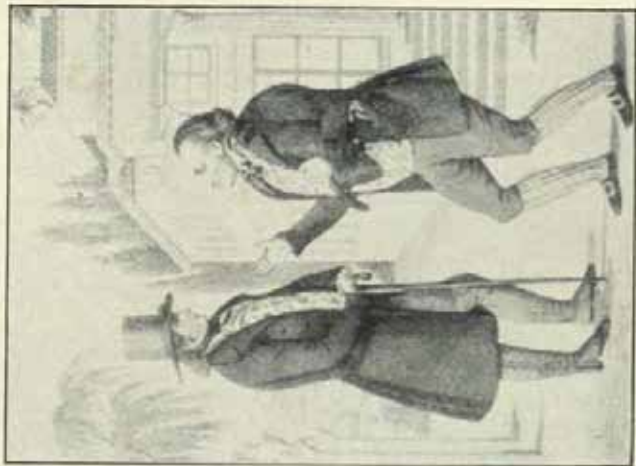
## VII

The Burgtheater and Joseph Schreyvogel—Sophie Schröder and her contemporaries in the company—Devrient's starring visit to Vienna—His death.

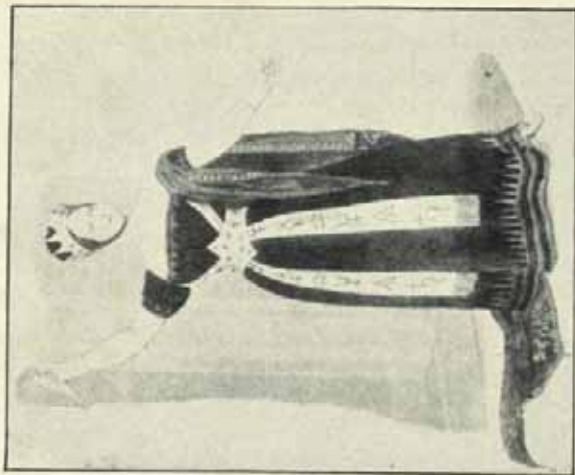
IN the meantime the Vienna Burgtheater had undergone a change of conditions similar to that which had taken place in the leading theatres of Germany. It had been leased, along with two other Vienna theatres, to Count Palffy, but his enterprise proved unsuccessful, leading to complete financial disaster; and the Burgtheater then (1817)

<sup>1</sup> Devrient suffered much from gout, and his fingers, even at this time, when he was only thirty-eight, were so crooked and stiff that he could hardly write.

<sup>2</sup> 1916.



79.—Rainald (on the right) as Valentin in  
*Der Versuchene* (p. 335).



80.—Sophie Schröder as Medea (p. 337).





became a Court Theatre, directly under the Emperor. At the same time, however, a piece of great good fortune befel the theatre, in its complete separation from the Opera, which was leased out to an Italian. The theatre could now devote itself exclusively to its proper purpose; indeed it not only could, but must do so, since, in pursuance of the contract between the State and the lessee of the Opera house, the performance by the Burgtheater of any kind of opera, in fact of any piece in which vocal music was a feature, was strictly prohibited. This was inconvenient in some cases—it prevented, for instance, the production of P. A. Wolff's *Preciosa* with Weber's music, which was a popular attraction at all the other great German theatres—but it had this great advantage: it entailed the complete banishment of the lower classes of popular play, vaudevilles and the like, from the stage of the Burgtheater. These light popular pieces now had to take refuge entirely in the minor 'specialty' theatres, one of which, the Leopoldstädter Theatre, soon developed into a highly characteristic feature of the dramatic physiognomy of Vienna, thanks to the famous popular actor and author, Ferdinand Raimund.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Raimund (1790-1836) was, both as actor and as author, a real genius in popular drama. A Viennese by birth, and sprung from the people—his father was a master-turner, and he himself began as a confectioner's apprentice—he had a thorough understanding of the Austrian popular character, in its bright, good-humoured gaiety and its somewhat facile sentimentality. He began his theatrical career as a tragic actor in various travelling companies; but, at the age of twenty-four, joined the Josephstädter Theatre at Vienna, where he also took the tragic line—playing Franz Moor for instance. Later, however, he went over to the Leopoldstädter Theatre, where he found his true vocation in acting, as an interpreter, now comic now pathetic, of the people's life; and where in his plays—*The Spendthrift*, *The Peasant as Millionaire*, *Youth*, etc.—he created a peculiar, musical-romantic genre of folk-comedy, the influence of which was not confined to Austria, but spread far beyond its borders. The relation between his, and his successor Nestroy's, dramatic work and our Danish popular romantic vaudevilles and folk-tale plays, such as Ploug's *Atellner* and Hostrup's and H. C. Andersen's musical pieces, we must leave it to literary criticism to investigate. His highly individual talent in acting affected powerfully not only his own popular audiences, but also his cultured confrères of the Burgtheater, and even such an actor as Ludwig Devrient himself. Costenoble says of his Valentin in *The Spendthrift*: "No living actor has penetrated as deeply as Raimund into the human heart"; and Devrient said to Anschütz, when he had seen Raimund in *The Peasant as Millionaire*: "The man's playing is so true, that a miserable creature like myself regularly suffers and freezes with him." Raimund died by his own hand in a fit of insanity, at the age of forty-six. He imagined he had been bitten by a mad dog, and shot himself for fear of hydrophobia.



The Burgtheater had another piece of good fortune in being given an excellent Artistic Director, the talented, refined, and well-informed dramatic expert Joseph Schreyvogel. True, the Court management under which he worked was inexpert enough, consisting as it did of a Chamberlain, Count von Wrba, and a Hofrath von Füljod, but these officials had at any rate sense enough to interfere very little, to begin with, in artistic matters.

Joseph Schreyvogel was a man of wide and various culture, and an able writer—under the pseudonym of Karl August West he published romances, plays and essays in criticism (particularly in dramatic criticism), which are now forgotten, but which in their day were rated very highly. He had already been Secretary to the Burgtheater, under Count Palffy's management, and in that position had shown that he possessed an unquestionable gift for the artistic leadership of a theatre. It was in truth he, and he alone, who created the Burgtheater as we know it—a theatre which for a century has been among the first in Europe, and for a long time was absolutely the first in the German-speaking countries. For eighteen years he devoted himself to its advancement with unexampled industry, zeal and patience, and the reward he received, at the end of this period, was to be dismissed suddenly, and in exceedingly offensive fashion, by an aged, half-senile and wholly fatuous 'Theatre-Count'—Czernin—who felt his official dignity insulted by certain remarks reported to have fallen from the Director's sometimes rather caustic tongue.

Schreyvogel's strongest point as a theatrical director was that he was equally interested in literature and in theatrical art; and-as, in addition, he possessed a remarkable gift of conciliatory management, he succeeded—after struggling pertinaciously for several years with indurated custom in the older actors and technical incompetence in the bureau of administration—in placing the Burgtheater in a unique position, as the theatre possessing at once the best repertory of plays and the best ensemble of players.

As regards repertory, the achievement with which Schreyvogel's name is chiefly associated is the production of Grillparzer's fine and original dramatic work. But he



has many other titles to honour. A whole series of the plays of Shakespeare, who had hitherto been much neglected or mangled in performance, were given in a new translation; Schiller and Goethe also, in dealing with whom the theatre had been much behindhand, were now restored to honour and worthily presented; while of contemporary dramatic literature the Director selected the best, and for the most part only the best. With the authors—at least with the best authors, those whose works he played—he stood in high esteem. Grillparzer, in writing of him, remarks: “Schreyvogel had an excellent head—he was a sort of Lessing, though of course at a respectful distance. Apart from his trenchant logical faculty, however, he had another point in common with his predecessor: his artistic principles were rather the results of his study of the masters than the expression of views springing from his own individual thought.”<sup>1</sup>

He succeeded in introducing new blood into the acting personnel. Among the fresh talents he managed to attract to the theatre, the first place must be assigned to Sophie Schröder, *née* Burger, who was held to be beyond all question the greatest tragic actress in Germany. This, indeed, in itself, did not mean so very much, since, at the moment, Germany did not possess any other tragic actress who was above mediocrity. It may even be open to some doubt whether, outside Germany, the lady would have been considered a really great tragic actress. Even in Vienna she barely passed muster as such; the Viennese public often found her too “überschwenglich”<sup>2</sup> and hysterical, and it is very difficult, not to say impossible, to imagine that her personality would have impressed an English or a French audience as grand and moving. The German’s ideal of woman and the womanly pathetic is, we know, something different from that of other nations. Undoubtedly, however, she possessed a vehement, impassioned temperament, was in a high degree what the Germans call “reizbar,”<sup>3</sup> and had the power of giving herself up completely to her temperamental impetuosity.

<sup>1</sup> See Josef Schreyvogel’s *Tagebücher*, edited by Karl Glossy. Pt. i. p. lxxvii.

<sup>2</sup> Extravagant.

<sup>3</sup> Nervously excitable.



She was a Prussian—born at Paderborn in 1781—the daughter of an actor named Burger; and was married, at a very early age, to a Manager called Smets (also known as Stollmers), a man much older than herself, to whom she bore a son when she was barely sixteen years old. The marriage was dissolved a few years later; and in 1804 she married again, this time an actor and singer named Schröder, whose name she continued to bear to the end of her life, though in the meantime she had made a third essay of matrimonial felicity. This, however, happened a good deal later, when, as a widow of forty-six, she fell in love with Wilhelm Kunst,<sup>1</sup> a young stage genius who missed his mark in life.

In 1801 she obtained an engagement at the Hamburg Theatre under Fr. Ludwig Schröder, and we may presume that it was under Schröder's influence that she gave up the ingénue rôles, to which she was very ill suited, and took up the serious line of parts. She was short and stout, with a broad, flat face; but her voice was sonorous, and her temperament earnest and severe, as well as vehement. Under Schröder, with whose company she remained for a long time, she had the best possible training; to which, however, she did not always conform, for it is certain that she became, in time, too rhetorical and declamatory. Nor can there be any doubt that, even in her new line, tragedy, her plainness produced a disturbing effect—at least outside Prussia; it is recorded that the Viennese audiences, very ungallantly, broke out more than once into audible merriment in passages where the author's text required that reference should be made to her bewitching beauty. On the whole, it is very difficult for a foreigner to escape the impression that she must have produced on the stage

<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm Kunst (1799-1859) was an actor of much talent in 'heroes' parts, who never rose to real eminence, though he often won considerable successes. He was handsome and prepossessing, but untrustworthy and vain. From youth upward he was constantly engaged in touring the country as a 'star' performer; but the days of his glory were brief. It was he who achieved the feat of 'doubling' the parts of Karl and Franz Moor in a performance of *The Robbers*. He was, for a time, much admired, and earned comparatively large sums of money by his 'starring' tours. But in his later years he fell into complete neglect, and he died in a Viennese charity-hospital. His wife, though eighteen years older than he, outlived him by nine years.



81.—Sophie Müller (p. 340).



82.—Anschutz as Wallenstein  
(pp. 317 and 339).



83.—Ferdinand Esslair as Wallenstein  
(p. 322).





somewhat the effect of a severe little Westphalian 'Hausfrau' in a rage. But it is impossible not to recognize the fact that by her combination of passion with sound technical method she was capable of completely carrying away her audiences, and that even great critics—Heinrich Laube for instance—exalted her dramatic power, in spite of her lack of womanly charm. It is clear that at the time of her joining the Burgtheater her artistic powers were at their height, and it was all in her favour that she was obliged, by her increasing stoutness, to change her line of parts, taking up the rôles which, in the technical language of the German stage, are known as 'Heldenmütter' parts.<sup>1</sup> In this line, which includes characters so various as Isabella in *The Bride of Messina*, Elisabeth in *Maria Stuart*, and Grillparzer's Sappho, she obtained, under Schreyvogel's direction, her greatest triumphs.<sup>2</sup>

Among the other prominent artists whom Schreyvogel gathered round him, we have already several times had occasion to speak of the excellent Heinrich Eduard Anschütz. Karl Ludwig Costenoble belonged to a somewhat older generation—he was born in 1769 and died in 1837—but he also was one of the Burgtheater's most trustworthy supporters, and was among those whose services Schreyvogel secured. Heinrich Laube characterizes him concisely in these words: "Dry, almost crabbed, but with a real vein of humour in comedy; with an unlooked-for, but equally real power to touch the heart in more serious, emotional parts. Never exaggerated, never flashy." His Sheva in Cumberland's *Jew*, and his Friar in *Nathan the Wise* were greatly admired.

Maximilian Korn, who was born and died in Vienna (1782-1854), was an actor of the true Viennese type—dashing, elegant, polished, agreeable. A charming lover in the lighter class of plays, a heaven-born Marinelli in *Emilia Galotti*—this, indeed, was his best part—he was,

<sup>1</sup> Heroic mothers.

<sup>2</sup> Sophie Schröder lived to the age of eighty-seven. The most important period of her career was that of her connection with the Burgtheater, but she played also, for a shorter period, at the Munich Court Theatre, and often went 'starring'—to the German theatre at Petrograd among other places. She died at Munich on the 25th March 1868.



on the other hand, weak in the lovers and heroes of tragedy. In this line his ultra-refinement, taste, and metropolitan elegance went particularly ill with Sophie Schröder's robust, Wendish vehemence.

Among the younger players Ludwig Löwe and Sophie Müller were the most prominent. Neither of them was, or ever became, a great artist; but, being both of them fresh, young and handsome, they made a charming pair of lovers in tragedy and the higher walks of comedy. They were both children of the theatre, and had been on the stage from early childhood; and when they joined the Burgtheater they proved very valuable recruits and became great favourites. Sophie Müller's time of usefulness, indeed, proved brief, for death carried her off, at the age of twenty-five, long before her powers had reached maturity. She was exceedingly beautiful, her loveliness having a character of gentle, womanly purity which must have been of ravishing effect in Cordelia, Thekla, and similar figures of the classic-ideal type, while much less suitable to the passionate, dæmonic characters she was sometimes obliged to undertake.

Ludwig Löwe, on the other hand, had an extraordinarily long career. His acting life at the Burgtheater alone lasted uninterruptedly for forty years—from 1826 to 1866;—before that, if his years as a child-actor be included, he had already been playing twenty years; and he did not die until 1871. At the period with which we are dealing he was a charming young hero and lover, full of a youthful ardour excellently suited to the ideal 'Liebhabere'<sup>1</sup> of German drama. He played Schiller's and Grillparzer's young men with fire and force, but the Shakespearian character-parts were beyond his powers.

It appears from Schreyvogel's *Diaries* that, as early as 1817, he had tried to engage Ludwig Devrient<sup>2</sup> to come to Vienna on a 'starring' visit, with the prospect of a permanent appointment; and that much was expected of the proposed engagement. Nothing came of the plan,

<sup>1</sup> Lovers.

<sup>2</sup> See Joseph Schreyvogel's *Tagebücher*, edit. K. Glossy, ii. 266, 270 and 271.

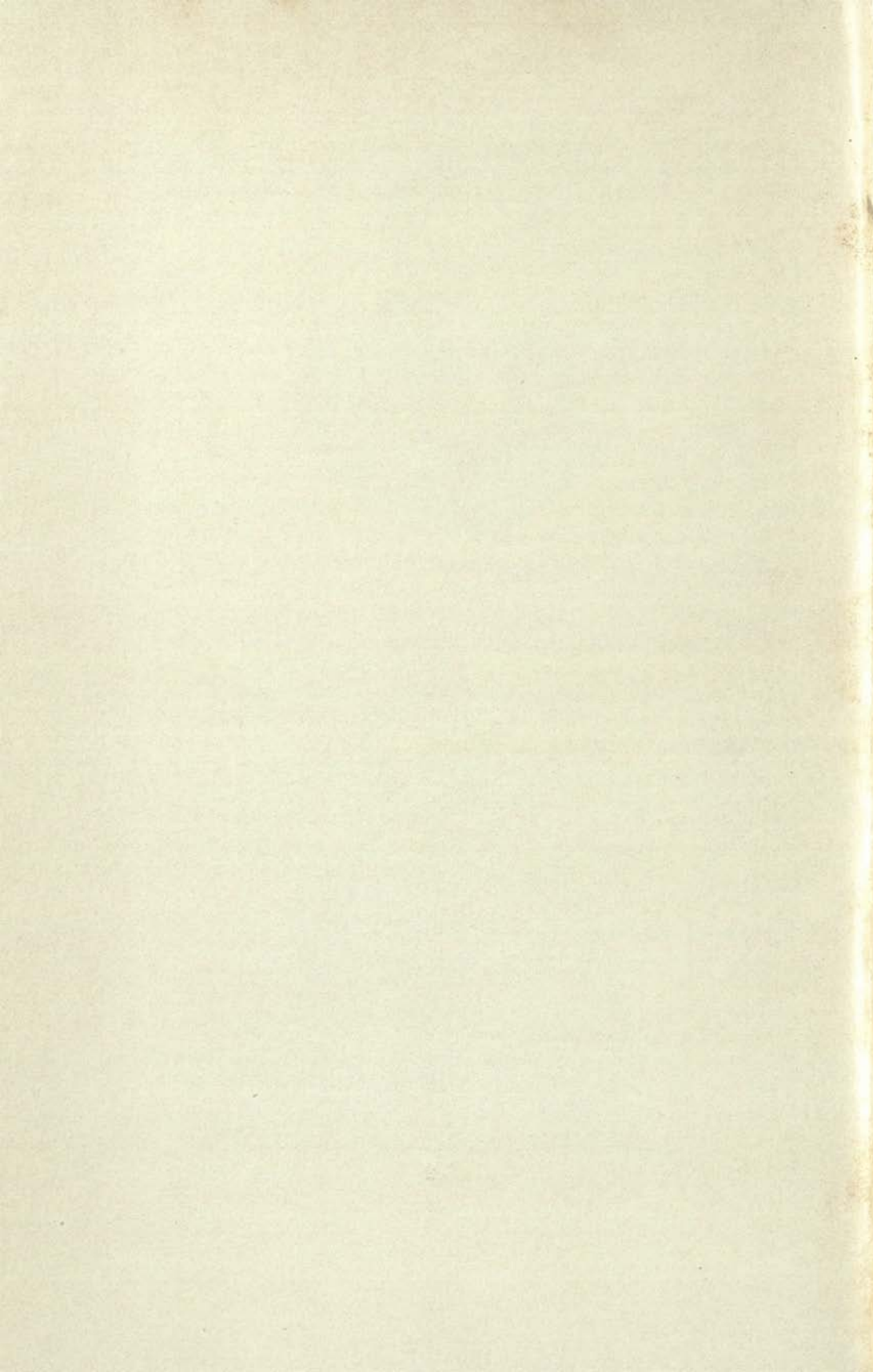


84.—Ludwig Löwe.



85.—Costenoble as The Friar [*Nathan der Weise*]  
(p. 339).





however, till 1828. Devrient must evidently always have felt a nervous dread of appearing before the Vienna public. When at last he did appear, in 1828, he was an infirm, broken man. "When we saw that rare being," Anschütz tells us, "with his head of genius and his eyes glowing with a feverish fire, sitting in the dressing-room before the performance, languid and unstrung, his body shrunk together from nervous collapse and hardly under his own control; when we saw how mechanically he stretched out his arms and legs to his dresser to have the motley garments of his part put on him; it was hardly possible to conceive how this ruined frame could be capable of free, artistic activity before the footlights."

This description bears a striking resemblance to the accounts, almost contemporary with it, of Kean's decline. But Devrient, more fortunate than Kean, succeeded in re-kindling his genius into a last, splendid blaze. He was able to present to the Vienna audiences a whole series of his best, most imaginative creations, beginning with Shylock and ending with Franz Moor; and to rouse them to a quite frantic enthusiasm for his artistry, in which his fellow-artists unreservedly joined. He was literally the universally acclaimed hero of the hour, and all men vied with each other in making plain to him their admiration and gratitude. For that one brief hour he revived, but only to sink back again into a nervelessness greater than before.

During his last four years he slipped unresistingly down and down towards extinction. His memory, originally an excellent one, now became impaired; he was unable to learn new parts; even in the old ones he was no longer certain; his body, always frail, was now like a pale, transparent husk that might at any moment be crushed and broken. His friends were dead, or far away. He sat in the tavern brooding, alone; often, for many days, he was unable to go near the theatre.

At last, on the 1st December 1832, came his release. He had appeared in Sheva, one of his most admired parts, after an illness of some duration, but even this rôle, which is not a very exciting one, it cost him the most heartbreaking exertions to go through with, and the



audience sat as still as statues, as though they feared that a storm of applause might extinguish the last faint flame of life. When the performance was ended he burst into tears, saying: "It is all over." He died on the 30th December, only forty-eight years old.

Devrient's name lived on upon the stage, in his three nephews, Karl, Emil and Eduard, all men of talent in their different ways; and it is still alive to this day in these three men's capable descendants. But he himself, his art, his unique personality, did not reappear in any of his race. There are certain types of player, and not mediocre types alone, which constantly repeat themselves in stage history, as if in a series of reincarnations. To none of these types did Ludwig Devrient belong. He was like none that went before him, though with some of them he might have points in common, and none since has been like him. He was of those single castings whose mould, once used, the gods break in pieces.

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